AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

BECOMING BEIRUTHLESS
STUDYING SENSATIONS AND SUBJECTIVITIES WITH BEIRUT'S FIRST ROLLER DERBY TEAM

by
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Camilla Schmidt Garder for Master of Arts
Major: Middle Eastern studies

Title: Becoming Beiruthless: Studying sensations and subjectivities with Beirut's first roller derby team

This thesis project explores the lives of young, female roller derby players in Beirut. It does so through the lens of feelings and sensations. It discusses the opportunities that derby players seek out through the sport: players experiment with sensations and inter-player relations during derby practices, i.e. altered time-spaces, which ultimately leads to transformations of their subjectivities. Derby-based sensations present themselves to players in qualitatively manifold ways. Sensations on the track mix, overlap, multiply, and overwhelm one another. They are shared, not solitary. They continuously form the sports setting from which they arose and are, in turn, formed by this sports setting. Meanwhile, the media attention facing the team distorts the opportunities sought out by players, as journalists interrupt the practice setting and impose narratives of the players in which they do not recognize themselves. Players seek to counter these narratives by critically selecting which journalists to engage with and through their use of social media, where they present themselves as they experience themselves.

Bodies, including material and immaterial bodies, affect other bodies and are affected by other bodies during derby practices. Each encounter between bodies forms a qualitative corporeal, material, and emotional transformation. This makes patiency and agency interchangeable on the derby track. Affect is key to understanding the stakes of playing roller derby, as variations in bodies' capacities to act, to affect, and to be affected, transform players and foster changes in their off-track lives.

Transformations of players do not have clear endpoints: Being a derby player is living in the processes of becoming a derby player, a becoming that is real in itself. Seeing the derby track as a Turnerian antistructure, I show that this becoming is a stage players go through which allows for them to behave in new ways and experiment with social and material elements. It prompts rediscoveries of *gendered*, *aged*, and *social* identities.

When outsiders are allowed into the derby track, then, stakes are high. Journalists' interventions into practice settings interrupt the derby time-space that allow for experimentation and rediscoveries. Some journalists have represented the team as pioneers who fight patriarchy through their sport, or as victims of war who use roller derby to escape from the horrors in their pasts. Players do not recognize themselves in these narratives, and it frustrates them when outsiders remove focus from their actual motivation for playing derby: the joy of the game itself. Ultimately, the players want and fight to maintain their on-track becomings, their involvements in a sport they love, and their sisterhood.

Through my thesis research, I have sought to explore the stakes of being an athlete playing a high-intensity physical sport. These are manifold. This thesis is my testament, the result of long-term engagement with the players of Beiruthless, as a

researcher, a teammate, and a friend. It presents readers with an insider view of the sensations and feelings of playing roller derby from the perspective of a player

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BECOMING BEIRUTHLESS

CHAPTER I

BEIRUTHLESS; AN INTRODUCTION

> They turned us into a rebellious group. Maybe we are, but we want people to focus on the sport, the team, the sisterhood that we created and the way we push our bodies to the limits.[1]
>
> Weim, roller derby player, Beiruthless

Beiruthless, the first roller derby team in Beirut, attracts attention from various sources: the international derby community, foreign news stations, local journalists, and, most recently, anthropological research carried out by me. Roller derby, a high-intensity full-contact sport that was invented in its current form in the early 2000's, tends to attract attention internationally, in part because it is a violent sport that is mostly played by women, and in part because it mingles with a politics of gender equality, inclusivity, and non-discrimination towards gender minorities (cf. Moffett 2013 and Whitlock 2012). The attention that Beiruthless gets, however, differs from the attention most derby teams get in one important aspect: it focuses on their Muslim-Arab identity (cf. Holland 2017; Collard 2016; D'Ignoti 2017B). While I have received nothing but welcome from team members, I noticed early in my fieldwork a need from their side to tell me what they are not: Beiruthless is not a group of gender activists doing a sport to fight patriarchy. In the beginning of my research, I ascribed the insistence behind this message to my Northern European background and players' knowledge of the stereotypes about Arab-Muslim women prevalent where I grew up. I

[1] This quote was used in the recent article, "Skates on: Beirut's first all-women derby team are rolling," published by *Middle East Eye* (D'Ignoti 2017A).

came to realize that it stems rather from *experiences* of being represented as norm-breakers, Muslim women, and natives of lands torn apart by civil wars. The prevailing narrative in journalistic writings about the team removes focus from what these women see themselves as before anything else: A community of athletes, fighting to get recognized as such and to improve their skills in a sport that requires technique, strength, flexibility, and courage. Above all, Beiruthless is a community of athletes doing an unconventional sport and striving to become better skaters and players.

My engagement with Beiruthless differs from that of many journalists. Through long term fieldwork, I have gained an insider point of view. This thesis explores the lives of the young roller derby players in Beirut from that angle. It explores how playing a high-intensity sport *feels*, how the feelings of doing a sport are structured into ultimately transformative experiences, as well as how players respond to outsiders interfering with their practices. My main aim is to provide readers with an inside view of the sensations and joy of doing a sport, the ways in which the players rediscover their subjectivity by playing roller derby, and lastly, how the team struggles to get recognition as a "sisterhood" of athletes (as Weim put it above). This thesis tells stories of being on the track; of the ecstasy and liberty we, the players, experience on the field, of sore muscles and injuries as well as the joy of successfully learning a new move, winning a scrimmage, and, most of all, of skating around the track with our teammates. It tells stories of finding ourselves on unfamiliar grounds, or rather two inches above ground, on a pair of wheels and armored with protective gear, and of being and becoming Beiruthless in what can best be described as a Turnerian anti-structure that allows us to re-experience our bodies, ourselves, and our relationships with each other.

A. Research question and structure

In this thesis, I focus my attention on exploring three areas through the angle of feelings and sensations: 1) ***What opens up for women in Lebanon through sports*** with regards to the ways in which athletes ***sense*** themselves and their surroundings on and off the sports field; 2), How sensations restructure relationships and transform **subjectivities**; and lastly, 3) How players respond to and deal with **publics** responses to them playing an unconventional sport. I explore these issues through the case of roller derby players in Beirut, all members of the team Beiruthless, and all between the age of 20 and 30. This thesis investigates body-self-society connections in the lives of young, female athletes.[2] It does so through an investigation of practice sessions as time-spaces that rearrange players' relationship to sensations and produce experiences that transform subjectivities.

To explore this body-self-society connection, this thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter One explores derby-based sensations and the ways in which these sensations affect time and space, physically and emotionally transforming players. This chapter concludes with a discussion of *being* and *becoming* and proposes the argument that being a derby player is ultimately living in the processes of becoming a derby player. I hold that this becoming is real in itself, as opposed to a becoming that only exists retrospectively after a subject has transformed. Chapter Two explores practice sessions as liminal zones and altered time-spaces which restructure players' relationship to sensation, foster reflections on subjectivities, and ultimately transform these subjectivities. The reflections in liminal zones, derby practices, are changing the ways in which players experience their lives outside derby practice as well. Finally, Chapter

[2] This connection between body, self, and society was explored by Michel Foucault in the first volume of The History of Sexuality (Foucault 1978[1976]).

Three explores what happens when outsider publics intervene in derby practice. I discuss how journalists have represented the team and how this has affected both individual players and the team as a whole. Together, these three chapters provide readers with an inside view of the stakes of doing a high-intensity physical sport, which is unconventional and unfamiliar to many outside derby communities, from the perspective of the players.

Throughout this thesis, I use two main narratives. The main text is an analytical discussion of roller derby. Additionally, ethnographic descriptions of practices and other interactions between team members are in 11.5 font and indented 1 cm on each side. I have divided the two in formatting to provide readers with the opportunity of reading the descriptions in their own right, not just through my analytical lens.

B. Roller derby

I planned to have a wider focus on high-intensity physical sports played by women when I started this project. I realized early in my research that the richness of the analysis came from the derby track, and the final product is thus largely about roller derby. There are several reasons for this: First, Beirtuhless is a relatively small team and independent of clubs or organizations. Beiruthless is run by the members' energy and commitment; it is arranged *by the players, for the players*. The flat structure allowed me to gain access to the whole team and all aspects of team life, including planning and management, PR-work, and the actual practice in a relatively short amount of time. Second, the team had merely existed for little more than a year when I joined. This gave me the opportunity to reach a technical level close to that of other players and take part in the same practices as other players, as opposed to sports teams where players are

highly experienced, and I could not have played on equal terms with other players. Lastly, the Beiruthless players are all in their 20s and all students (either masters or undergraduate). This gave me an opportunity to nuance my insiderness as my lifestyle and daily rhythm are similar to that of most players.

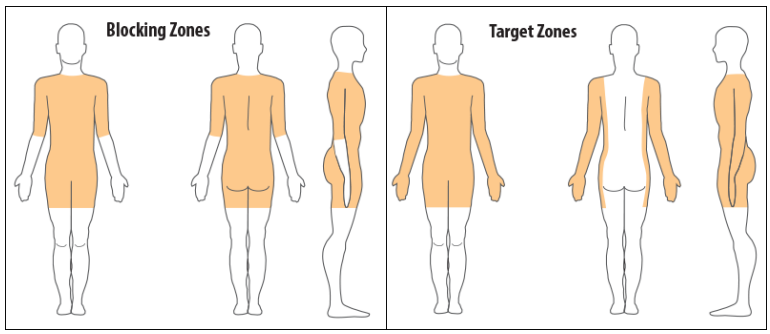
That being said, my data relates to other sports as well through interviews and minor engagements. In the following subsections, I provide an overview of the history of roller derby, the game-rules, the Beiruti team, and the other sports that feature in this thesis.

1. Flat-track roller derby—a brief history and game rules

The term, "roller derby," first appeared in the US in the 1920s where it referred to roller skate races (WFTDA Roller Derby History n.d.). In the 1930s, roller derby evolved into a game similar to today's flat-track roller derby: players began competing in teams scoring points by passing opponents, using aggressive moves and close physical contact to do so. In the following decades, roller derby became more of a spectacle showing women wrestling on roller skates. Popularity declined in the 1970s, and the sport did not revive until early 2000s despite several attempts during the 80s and 90s. In 2001, the sport was re-launched by Texas Roller Girls, a team in Austin. The sport grew rapidly in the 2000s, the umbrella organization Women Flat Track Derby Association (henceforth WFTDA) was founded in 2004, and by 2010 the sport included more than 450 registered teams worldwide (WFTDA Roller Derby History n.d.).

Modern roller derby is officially named flat-track roller derby. The rules of flat-track roller derby are standardized by the WFTDA and available to all derby players

through their webpage (cf. WFTDA Rules n.d.). Flat track roller derby is a high-intensity, full-contact sport played on an elliptical flat track by two teams of five players each (on the track). All players wear quad skates, a helmet, elbow-, wrist-, and kneepads, and a mouth guard. Each team has a jammer, who has a star on her helmet, and four blockers, one of whom is the pivot (with a stripe on her helmet), the only blocker who can replace the jammer. Points are scored by the jammer every time she passes one of the opponent's blockers (except the first time). The game is played in two halves of 30 minutes, divided into units of play called *jams* of up to two minutes. Before a *jam*, jammers are behind the *jammer line* and blockers between the *jammer line* and the *pivot line*. The beginning of a *jam* is marked by the referee who blows a whistle. The jammers now race to the *packs* of blockers, with the aim of passing the opposing team's blockers. The blockers simultaneously attempt to prevent the opposing team's jammer from passing them and to help their team's jammer in passing the opposing blockers. Blockers can use the legal *blocking zones* to hit and push jammers on the legal *target zones* (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2).



Figures 1.1 and 1.2: Legal blocking and target zones in roller derby (WFTDA Blocking Zone Diagrams n.d.)

The jammer who first passes the opposing blockers becomes lead jammer, meaning she can call off the jam anytime she wants (she does so by signaling with a hand gesture

where she moves her hands from the high of her head down to her hips). The second time a jammer passes the pack of blockers, she scores one point per blocker she passes. A jam ends when the two minutes run out or when the lead jammer calls it off.

2. Beiruthless

Beiruthless started in the spring of 2015. The team was started with the help of GAME Lebanon, a non-profit urban sports organization working to improve street sports opportunities in low-income neighborhoods (cf. GAME n.d.), in conjuncture with Elisabeth Wolffhechel, a derby veteran from Copenhagen. Elisabeth coached the team for the first three months. Since then, the team has been self-taught. We practice on a basketball court which we rent from a private school. In the US, many teams use old skate halls, which were popular in the 1980s. In Beirut, our best opportunity is a basketball court on which we mark the track with cones. With limited resources and in a city where no skate halls exist, the team resorts to creativity to make practices possible. Roller derby is a sport that is *by the players, for the players* (WFTDA Mission Statement n.d.), meaning that teams are run by athletes themselves. In Beirut, we divide tasks on a semester basis (more or less). One player, Karima (or at times Nada) functions as the coach, while other players co-coach new players ("fresh meat" in derby terminology). Another player takes care of management tasks such as renting the basketball court. A third player, Nahla, is the one mainly responsible for PR-tasks. Players, also those not holding coaching or management positions, assist each other in other tasks related to the sport. I, for example, have taught several players to lift weights to help them gain strength and persistence in ways that are beneficial for derby players. Beiruthless' management and arrangement of practice sessions by itself contrasts to the

ways in which most sports club work in Lebanon. Most clubs are administered by paid staff and players pay fees to play games and practice. The only fee Beiruthless pays is for renting the track, and that fee is divided amongst the players.

In the time I have been involved with the team, it has consisted of 10-15 players. The variation is due to new players joining and old players resigning. The majority of players are studying at the American University in Beirut under the AMIDEAST's MEPI's Tomorrow's Leaders scholarship program (cf. AMIDEAT MEPI n.d.). The players are of different nationalities; Egyptian, Yemeni, Bahraini, Libyan, Tunisian, American, Lebanese, and (me) Danish. The players come from different backgrounds, but most characterize their upbringings as middle-class within their local communities. As most of the players are scholarship students, they live off the allowance they get from the scholarship. While the players think they are privileged in comparison to many others in Lebanon because of this scholarship, they would not be able to pay the fees that most sports clubs take. Their scholarship covers health insurance, a prerequisite for playing a full-contact sport with high risks of injuries. The team hopes to become more diverse with time, but often lack of health insurance or conflicting schedules prohibit potential newcomers.

3. Other high-intensity physical sports

While this thesis mainly explores the lives of roller derby players in Beirut, other sports, such as soccer, weightlifting, and skateboarding, are represented through quotes from interviews, observations, and other minor engagements. These work as comparisons to roller derby and feature in some parts of this thesis. Soccer, weightlifting, and skateboarding are all high-intensity sports, like roller derby. While

soccer and roller derby are team sports, weightlifting and skating can both be practiced alone and in groups. The actual engagements with other sports are described in the next section.

C. Methodologies: the feelings of fieldwork

I was introduced to Beiruthless when I met Elisabeth in the spring of 2015. She had just launched the team in conjunction with the NGO GAME. A year later, I looked up the team on Facebook as I was looking for female sports teams for my thesis research. To my luck, I knew one of the players, Lynn, who introduced me to the team. I joined practice for the first time in the spring 2016 and became a stable member in the fall the same year. Since then, I have partaken in practice sessions, skated on the corniche, worked out at the gym, and joined team dinner and parties on a regular basis. At the beginning of my field research, I took in skateboarding a few times and played a few friendly matches for a female soccer team.

Participant-observation has been my main method of data collection. This is a method in which the ethnographer takes part in activities, interactions, and events which are significant in the daily lives of a group of people as means to learn the explicit as well as tacit aspects of their lives (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011:1). As many derby players see each other daily, and as I have become an integrated part of the team, I have conducted field research off the track as much as on the track. I have taken part in countless informal conversations about roller derby and about the team in Beirut. Such conversations have deepened my knowledge of roller derby and of the lives of the players.

Participant-observation can seem oxymoronic (Hastrup et al. 2011:61-2). It involves an active involvement using all senses that allows for experiential ways of learning which give insight into experiences that are not always vocalized as well as a more distant, reflective systematic documentation of these experiences (Hastrup et al. 2011:61-2). For the case of sports studies, non-vocal ways of embodying knowledge of practices are key: I have throughout my research paid great attention to the ways in which practices on the track provoke *sensations* and how *sensations* transform athletes. Doing this, I drew on Paul Stoller (1989, 1997), who argues:

> To accept sensuousness in scholarship is to eject the conceit of control in which body and mind, self and other are considered separate […] [It is] to lend one's body to the world and accept its complexities, tastes, structures, and smells (Stoller 1997:xvii).

To lend my body to the field of derby has not always been an easy task. Participant-observation involves a passive observing and distancing by systematically documenting the experiences of participation; for example, writing notes after participating in a practice session, gains for the ethnographer an analytical distance from the experiential states of participation (Hastrup et. al 2011:61-2, Malinowski [1922] 1964:24). As *sensations* are never simple and always doubled by the feeling of having a feeling (Massumi 2002:13), focusing on *sensations*—tracking them, writing them down, coding them—fosters yet another cluster of feelings. Actively trying to record my feelings on and off the derby track, left me at times lost in feelings about feeling and the feelings of thinking about the feelings of having a feeling. In the end, it multiplies so endlessly, my thinking imploded. An example: One of the events that have marked my sensory memory of derby practice the most was when a player broke her ankle. In my field notes from that day, I stated that she screamed for about ten seconds when she fell. Later, when I spoke to her about the fall, she only remembered pain, not screaming.

Looking back, while I clearly remember her screaming, I have no idea whether she screamed for a second or ten seconds. I suspect that my own emotional involvement and the intensity of the situation affected my immediate memory of the fall and made me think the scream lasted longer than it did. I have spent much time thinking about this event as it made me question the nature of my field notes. James Clifford asserts that the strength of participant-observation is its emphasis on experience. At the same time though, experiences are never unambiguous and always subjective (Clifford 1983:130). My experiences of playing derby are ultimately depending on my previous experiences, my background, and my physical abilities. They do not always correlate to the experiences other players have of the same practices. Therefore, other ways of collecting data have been important for my feelings of doing research, as data from interviews and audio-visual recordings provided me with data that back up my experiences and relate them to other players.

In this thesis, I supplement the data from participation in roller derby, weightlifting, skateboarding, and soccer games with data from semi-structured, formal interviews with some of the athletes. Through these interviews, I have gained access to players' own reflections on their experiences on the fields and how these experiences interact with other aspects of their lives. In addition to eight of the derby players, I have interviewed: Elisabeth and Ibrahim, who helped launch the team; two skateboarders; a basketball player and coach; and a soccer player and coach. Some of these interviews feature directly in this thesis through quotations. Other interviews helped me understand the field early in my fieldwork, especially those with Elisabeth and Ibrahim, and only feature indirectly. All quotations in this thesis include the first name of the interviewee. In this way, I stay true to my field and the names I got to know players by and ensure

that players, on the one hand, can recognize themselves in my writings and, on the other hand, stay anonymous to outsiders of the Beiruti derby community. As two of the derby players share the name Nada, I refer to them as Nada Yemen and Nada Tunis, names referring to the nations of origin and names. Importantly, we use on the team to distinguish between them. Where the quotations from derby players are only marked by name and date, quotations from other athletes include the sport they practice for clarity.

Lastly, two more methods of data collection should be mentioned here: audio-visual recordings and online interactions with players. Throughout my involvement with the team I have used a video-recorder to record both inside and outside of practice sessions. I have done this with the hope of eventually turning the material into a short documentary, as audio-visual ways of communicating ethnographic knowledge offer viewers "means to experience and understand ethnographic complexity, richness and depth, which are the distinguishing features of anthropological knowledge" (Society for Visual Anthropology Guidelines 2001). This way of collecting data proved to be a beneficial supplement to my written notes as well: I often watched and re-watched recordings after writing field notes and took notes while watching the recordings. Audio-visual material helped me provoke my memory of sensations on the track. As Sara Pink teaches us, the camera captures various sensations as it records "visual, aural, verbal, temporal, and even (through synesthetic association) tactile domains" and recordings help "evoke the research encounter itself," including the sensory experiences that the camera does not capture (Pink 2009:100).

Filming on the derby track was a natural way to collect data, as team members already record with their cell phones to post on various social media platforms. Throughout my research I have partaken in various online interactions with the team,

ranging from private message on Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, group messages on the same two platforms, to posting, liking, and sharing derby related material on my private Facebook and Instagram profiles. These interactions are significant parts of the lives of the Beiruti roller derby players and have been important ways to become an insider in the field and to understand the complexity of interacting with publics as a new roller derby team in Lebanon (see Chapter Four for an elaborate discussion of this).

Lastly, a few notes should be made on my own position in the field. My background simultaneously makes me an insider and an outsider in sports fields in Lebanon. While my age and my gender in many ways make me a natural insider, early in my research my Northern European background drew much attention to itself. As noted earlier in this chapter, derby players kept emphasizing that they are not playing to fight patriarchy or as escapism from traumas to me. This changed over time, as I became an integrated part of Beiruthless and as players captured the nature of anthropological research, I sense that they came to appreciate highly my presence both as a player and as a researcher. Comment such as, "Camilla, we trust you, you know us," (in opposition to the journalists that write about the team), and, "If anyone should write about us, it should be you," signaled to me that the players trust I will be true to their experiences and motivations and not politicize them in ways that alienate them from their own experiences.

Furthermore, I have played sports my whole life and gained access by already being strong and embodying knowledge of how to move my body with or without skates. As a former personal trainer, my knowledge of lifting weights became a way to integrate into the team. As Beiruthless is a self-run sports team, all players contribute to making the practice sessions possible and in each other's improvements as players. My

main contribution has been with regards to off-track gym session, as I have taught many of the players how to lift weights to improve their strength and their persistence on the derby track. Through comments both on and off the track, verbally and in written messages on social media, I know that my teaching has transformed the players physically and mentally (see Chapters Two and Three for discussion of the interaction between the two). I know that I have changed the very setting which I study. Willingness to engage personally, teach and ultimately transform others are prerequisites for engagement with roller derby, a sport that is *by the player, for the players.* The intense engagement and the ways in which I have partaken in other players' transmutations, as they have partaken in mine, have created close bonds between me and other players. I treasure and feature these friendships in this thesis in my discussions of kinship amongst members of Beiruthless and joking relations (see Chapter Three).

D. Sports and gender studies in the Arab-Islamic world

Anthropologists have studied gender in the Arab-Islamic region for decades from varies approaches and in various settings (Abu-Lughod 1989:287-94; Deeb & Winegar 2012:542-4). Some anthropological gender studies in the region have challenged popular Western discourses about gendered lives in the region in various ways (cf. Mahmood 2005; Abu Lughod 1993). My aim here is to add to this research by focusing on *sensations* of doing sports to understand the complexity of the lives of young women who in engage in high-intensity physical sports. While gender studies in the region take many forms, sports studies of women are sparse. There could be countless reasons for this, but it seems reasonable to suggests that sports are not settings

where gendered identities are at play in the conventional sense: athletes, while possessing gendered bodies, are not positioned on the sports field as gendered subjects in the same ways as female-male difference affect positions in families, politics, or the workforce. Here, I study gender through a sports lens because the sports setting allow for subjects to question and re-experience their gendered (as well as aged and social) identity through sensations unheard of outside this sport setting. Sports provide athletes with the potential for subjunctive reflections on their lives, including gendered experiences outside the track.

Several studies of sports have been conducted in the Arab-Islamic world focusing on sport from the viewpoint of policymakers and the sectarianism of fan bases and club divisions (cf. Reiche 2011; Al-Masri 2016). While sports studies in the MENA-region generally are not focused on gender, it is important to note here that gendered issues in the field of sport have been the subject of journalistic pieces and documentaries about the region, which is also true for Beiruthless, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Beirut's first derby team has been the subject of a significant amount of articles, documentaries, podcasts, and other online posts. I deal with the gendered identity from a different point of view then that of the journalists: I use gender not as essential categories that form the motivations for and effects of participating in a sport with regards to socio-political structures. Rather, my focus on gender stems from the ways in which athletes question their gendered identity on the track. Derby-based sensations transform players and allow for re-experiences of subjectivities. The ways in which the players have been portrayed in various media outlets will be discussed further in Chapter Four and juxtaposed with my ethnographic findings.

Other sports also feature in articles and documentaries about gender and sports. An important mention here is the 2015 documentary, *Speed Sisters*, which follows a group of female race-car drivers in Palestine (Fares 2015). This documentary is an important inspiration for my own documentary work as well as my analytical work in this thesis, as it explores the lives of a *community* of young, female athletes and their motivations for and struggles with doing a high-intensity and, for females, unconventional sports. *Speed Sisters* presents the lives of young, Palestinian women through the lens of race-car driving. The documentary shows how the sport provoke reflections on subjectivities, including gendered identity. Here, I take from the documentary a focus on the ways in which sports allow for subjects to reflect upon their lives and transform through their engagement with material and social bodies in a sports setting.

E. Becoming players

This thesis is dense with derby terminology. The terms of the actual game, have been defined in this chapter. Other terms are defined as they appear. Likewise, is the theoretical language defined when it appears. Here, I want to point to two terms that run throughout this thesis: *Becoming players*. I use the term *players* to refer to the processes of *becoming players*. *Player* is not a term referring to stable identifiers; rather it is used to signal the on-track transmutations of team members. This term is conditional on the practice; it refers to a state of becoming and not an essential category. In other words, it is by playing that team members come to embody the traits of a roller derby player and not because of the traits that they become players. This argues against an essentialist vision that see toughness, for example, as inherent to the players prior to

their participation. On the derby track, players experiment with toughness more than they are essentially tough. For every encounter on the derby track, the players' transform; their very ability to act in the world is at play. These changes do not lead to a clear end; the players do not become tough and then stop experimenting. Rather, they *feel* tough and strive to become tougher, and re-experience themselves in the processes of becoming-tougher. I stress on experience here to point to the embodied ways of learning the world through sensory engagements and affective ways of interacting with other bodies—to stress the importance of sensory memories in *becoming derby players*. *Becoming* refers to players' transmutations on the track—to the ways in which their experimentations with bodies (which, following Spinoza are crucially both material and immaterial), in altered time-spaces allow them to re-experience their subjectivities. *Becoming,* thus, refers to the potentially of sensing the world anew and living in these re-experiences of who we, the players, are, as individuals and as a group.

CHAPTER II

SENSATIONS

> Everything, the whole skating is exciting. Just the excitement of you trying something new with your body, and just seeing where it goes. The peak of excitement would be when you're willing to try something new, just the fact that there is this push to try something new. There's an excitement of challenging each other on the track, the fact that we are deliberately willing to go against each other physically and test our strength. When practicing blocking techniques and the force that is generated is mostly from this overwhelming excitement to win or to test my limits.
>
> (Alaa, interviewed by author, Beirut, May 6th 2017)

> Roller derby taught me a lot about my body and its capacities. I felt surprised a lot of times when realizing that I can actually do a certain move that I thought I could never do.
>
> (Karima, interviewed by author, Beirut, June 24th 2017)

A range of sensations—from ecstatic moments of exhilaration and energy to frustration and intense pain and exhaustion—engulf players on the derby track. Players embody power and strength, competitiveness, and a desire to be and become tougher, stronger, faster, technically better. In this chapter, I foreground four sensations; excitement, liberty, pain, and toughness. These are group-generated experiences sought out by women going out of the usual ways of knowing and living themselves. Players live sensations during derby practice collectively; sensations that transform the sports setting from which they arose, the team as a whole, as well as individual team members and communities in proximity to the sport of roller derby in Beirut. Sensations are thus essential to understanding the worlds that open up for women when they engage in this high-intensity sport.

Sensations frequently demand discussion. Pain strives for attention both in moments right after a player hits the ground and lets out a scream while other players gather around her, and later, either right after practice, or in group messages on social media where players share pictures of bruises and scratches. Other sensations rarely gain voice while on the track but do emerge in abstractions off the track: Players often describe the feeling of being tough through phrases such as, "we kicked some ass today." Likewise, sensing freedom and invincibility are expressed through truisms such as, "On the track, I can do anything." These sensations do not have an agential form, like pain does. Lastly, some sensations hardly find voice at all: The ecstasy of skating fast around the track and the joy of trying out new moves on skates do not feature in discussions but tacitly make themselves known to all who engage in the sport. Players' descriptions of the ways in which they sense excitement are only elicited by interventions: Alaa's description of this joy (see quote above) was an answer to my continuous requests for elaboration on what she means when she calls roller derby "exciting" and "the highlight of my week." When I provoked vocalizations, players often used adjectives such as *overwhelming* (see Alaa's quote above) or adverbs such as *extremely* and *really* to describe the intensity of the excitement, but they rarely described excitement in a qualitative sense: players seldom describe *how* excitement feels. While some sensations rarely manifest in player's vocalizations verbally and separately, other sounds do communicate their occurrence sometimes (sounds such as screams, roars, and laugher), as do gestures (such as smiles and waving arms for victory), or dance-like moves (using the whole body *including* the skates). Off the track, players share joy and excitement with friends and families both by showing pictures and sharing anecdotes from roller derby either through social media or face to face. These

off-track vocalizations feed back into the experiences on the derby track, with specific exercises being repeated and players paring up for drills based on who they know enjoys the same techniques.

Alaa's description of "the force that is generated" from "overwhelming excitement" indicates that these derby-based sensations are productive, generating qualitatively different sensations and regenerating into intensified experiences. Brian Massumi describes the "intrinsic connection" between movements, changes, and sensations that helps us grasp how sensations regenerate into intensified, and ultimately transformative, experiences:

> […] the slightest, most literal displacement convokes a qualitative difference, because as directly as it conducts itself it beckons a feeling, and feelings have a way of folding into each other, resonating together, interfering with each other, mutually intensifying, all in unquantifiable ways apt to unfold again in action, often unpredictable. (Massumi 2002:1).

On the derby track, embodiment of fear and pain go hand in hand with embodying strength and, as one of the players described it, a toughness that qualifies players to be *badass women*. While experiences of excitement, liberty, toughness, and pain are not disconnected, they are not clearly sequential in occurrence either. Rather, derby-based sensations *fold into each other* and *resonate together*. These sensations engender other sensations, not as a linear sequence of feelings, but rather as experiential states of being that overlap, mix, replace, and overwhelm each other. They are lived as trembling instances, pulsating moments that wave into each other in a cluster of disembodied sensations. On the track, sensations affect the ways in which players experience time and space and change the very bodies that generated the sensations.

Bodies, in the broadest sense of the word, including both material bodies (individual players and skates) and immaterial bodies (the sisterhood of the team, friendships, the international derby community), affect other bodies, and generate force, speed, and energy on the derby track. Here, I follow Massumi's definition of the body, made in reference to Barouch de Spinoza. This definition allows for a discussion of bodies focused on change and potentiality. What characterizes a body for Massumi is "relations of movement and rest" (Massumi 2002:15). Movements here are not to limited to actualized movements but rather "a body's *capacity* to enter into relations of movement and rest" (Massumi 2002:15). This capacity of the body encompasses the potential to affect and be affected. Massumi continues:

> Relations between movement and rest" is another way of saying "transition." For Spinoza, the body was one with its transition. Each transition is accompanied by a variation in capacity: a change in which powers to affect and be affected are addressable by a next event and how readily addressable they are—or to what degree they are present as futurities. (Massumi 2002:15)

A body is thus always in transition, equal to its transition, and its capacity to affect and be affected change with it. A body is that which can move or rest, and switch between those states—between agency and passivity—it is that which can affect and be affected. Being a derby player is living in the transition from being an unexperienced to becoming an experienced player. We, the Beiruti players, change and our bodies change by every interaction on the track, be it with other players or with skates and the ground and be it physical or immaterial interactions. Whilst playing, team members learn new ways of being, as stated in Karima's quote above about roller derby teaching her about her body and its capacities. New ways of being include individual as well as collective modes of coming into being as derby players, women, and as adults (see Chapter 3). In this thesis, I deal with sensations on the derby track as inter-bodily affections rather

than characteristics of individual bodies: moving—sensing—living on the derby track are intersubjective ways of experimenting with states of being: Players actualize potential ways of being through interactions with material bodies (other players, gear, track) and immaterial bodies (friendships, *communitas*, senses of belonging).

Dealing with experimental states of being, this chapter begins with an investigation of sensations through small case studies into different moments on the derby track. In many ways, the exploration of sensations here is as disembodied as the sensations themselves; while written in a linear manner, the following paragraphs can be read in any order. The distinctions between different sensations are more of a rhetorical structuring of thought necessary to provide readers with an inside view of the sensations of playing a high-intensity physical sport than they are a reflection of the ways in which sensations interrelate on the track.

A. Excitement and ecstasy

As Alaa's exuberant statement above testifies, sensing joy, embodying excitement, and getting lost in ecstatic moments are multidimensional ways of being on the derby track. Building on Massumi's model of folding and resonance, let me spell out what it means for excitement to be multidimensional, as opposed to linear, chronological, or binary. First, excitement comprises sensations that cannot always be localized in the body: sometimes excitement is felt as a tickling in the midriff or a rush that runs through and overwhelms the whole body, and other times it is an incorporeal feeling engulfing multiple players who feel happy and cheerful in their *togetherness*, with or without bodily responses to their happiness and cheerfulness. Excitement is a term that covers various sensations for the derby players; the excitement of skating full

speed is by no means equal to the excitement of learning a new move which, again, is in no way equal to the excitement of pushing and being pushed by other players. Likewise, the excitement of skating in the beginning of practice—feeling the ground, the skates, and your mental state on a specific day—produces a different experience from skating in the middle of a practice session—more comfortably relating to the ground and the skates, focusing on pushing oneself and exploring one's potential in relation to speed, technique, and strength. Excitement is neither homogenous nor spontaneous and distinct: Players experience excitement in qualitatively different ways. Yet, excitements are connected to previous experiences of excitement and potential future involvements.

What sensations of excitement do have in common are energetic elements produced by frictions. In contrast to daily life, roller derby involves a range of explicitly produced fractions: the friction of skates on ground generating speed, the friction of air on skin reducing speed, or the frictions between players. Derby players produce energy by interacting in various ways: they race against or with each other around the track; they copy and sync up to each other's movements, they push each other with shoulders and hips during scrimmages, and they grab each other's hips to transfer speed: Unpredictable interactions which are structured around elements of the derby practice but never the same. Players transfer speed to other players, for example, in strategic ways during game situations and in unforeseen ways during warm-up and technical training (see next section for an example of the latter). Strategic ways of transferring speed include *the whip*, a move where a player grabs a team member's hips from behind, while both are skating at high speed, and pulls her back to get momentum herself: *The whip* leaves the grabbed player barely moving, while the grabbing player moves with increased speed. Another strategy for transferring speed is the blocking

technique where one player uses another player's hip to jump onto the jammer—hitting the jammer with her hips—with more force than a single player can produce. When players do these kinds of moves the results are unpredictable. How much speed or force is generated? How do other players respond to the force or speed? How do I, a player, respond, unconsciously to speed or force? These unknowns live in the processes of interacting on the field, only to be realized through practices. The nexus of excitement lies exactly in the unpredictable—where everything is possible, and bodies change, move, and sense in new ways.

Excitement and ecstasy are sensations produced by feelings of bodies, again in the broadest sense of the word, and the dynamic (though unpredictable) transference of energy between these bodies. Those sensations exist multidimensionally, in and between those bodies, and transform with them.

1. Exhilarating energy

> I let out a scream, not a scream of shock or pain, but a scream of exhilaration caused by a sudden gain of speed. It is the same scream I let out when a rollercoaster is going down, gaining so much speed that I feel it tickling in my midriff. Now, it is not the mechanism of a rollercoaster generating speed and the tickling feeling but Alaa, who has a tight grip on my hips and is pushing me backwards while she accelerates on her skates. Overwhelmed by the sudden loss of control and the thrill generated by the continuous increase in speed, the transference of energy from Alaa to me, there is nothing to do—nothing I can do, but let out a scream, trust Alaa, and enjoy the ride.

Moments before the episode described above, Alaa was sitting on the bench on the side of the track, and I stood in front of her, teasing her for taking a break. Her riposte was to take me by surprise, overwhelming me with the feeling of acceleration, by transferring her energy to me. What followed were transferences of energy between

bodies that feed back and regenerate the energy at play. Retrospectively thinking out these transferences of energy, I understand the transference in the following manner:

> Alaa transfers energy from her body to her skates by taking strides, pushing down to the ground, using her thigh muscles. The ground reverberates the energy to her; consequently, her skates move her towards me. She grabs my hips when she reaches me, pushing me backwards by transferring energy to me. My body, extended by a pair of skates, interacts with the ground and regenerates energy. Alaa's transference of energy to her skates and the ground feeding back this energy to her happens simultaneously with her transferring energy to me while the transference of energy between the ground and my body (through the skate-extenders) regenerates.

Transferences of energy on the derby track are thus not linear—they are a clustered chaos of many transferences inducing each other, rebounding when bodies feed back. Exhilaration emerges between, in, and after such transferences of energy that run through derby practice, through bodies, and regenerate when bodies respond. When energy rebounds, derby players often experience an intensification of joy. The interaction described above happened in a few seconds, and I did not experience it as the extended transference of energy between bodies, but as a rush, pulsating between and through bodies—mine, my skates, Alaa's, and my bond with Alaa. The tickling at my midriff is but one felt bodily location—others include air on skin and the tight fingers on my hips—and analyzing the moment, I realize my enjoyment cannot be reduced to these locations. The episode which started above continued in the following way:

> When Alaa lets go of my hips again, I continue backwards until I have lost enough speed to break with my toe stops. Then I skate towards her, but she turns and skates away from me. I start chasing her around the track, a game of catch-me-if-you-can. My target is a few meters ahead of me, and both of us accelerate dizzingly. I feel the friction from the air on my bare arms and my face. The sound of my skates on concrete for each stride that I take, *shussssh shusssh*, adds to the joy of the moment and the fierce competition for speed, as a soundtrack adds to the mood of a movie.

The ecstasy of accelerating on skates is the thrill of interacting with wheels, with other players, and with the ground. It is allowing yourself or others to generate energy that becomes self-regenerating. This self-regeneration results from the ways in which wheels respond to the force a player initially put into them. Acceleration continues for an instant after a player stops taking strides and is felt the most strongly right after the player stops producing energy. This capacity of the wheels (and thus the skates and the skater) is perhaps best exemplified by the ways the wheels are tested after being adjusted. Wheels are attached to the skates through two bearings (inside and outside), around which they rotate. The bearings are tightened with a nut from the outside. If the nut is too tight, the wheels will not rotate smoothly around the bearings. The friction from the nut will stop them. Too loose, and the wheels might fall off the skates while a player skates, as the centrifugal force will push them outwards and they will eventually expel the nut. I was taught after changing or adjusting my wheels to spin each wheel to check the smoothness of the rotations and momentarily watch the wheels rotate, seemingly unstoppable. When the wheels do start losing speed, they do so rapidly. Likewise, when a player is skating fast around the track, she will at times stop taking strides on the straight parts of the track. While she is not putting energy into the skates anymore, the force from the wheels generating the swift, onward movement of the player continues and seems unstoppable for a moment. The length of this moment depends on the ways in which energy has been transferred to the wheels and the intensity of this transference.

In the episode above, the energy I felt was as much a product of my interaction with Alaa as with the wheels. When a player chases another player, though not physically in friction, they sense each other, and not just through sound and sights. She

senses the momentum, the challenge, and the tumult. Despite all this sensing, interactions between players are indeterminate. When chasing Alaa, I was driven by the unknown outcome—sensing my desire to explore what could come out of the situation, the joy of chasing the unidentified.

When two players chase each other, their relation to each other is in play: the very relation—the bond the two players share—elicits teasing and competing. What I am saying is that, the very *joy* of that co-feeling—feeling a connection to other players—produces energy that is transferred to skates, back to the skater, and back to other team members. Inter-player relations transform through these on-track interactions. The relation thus both *forms* the interactions and sensations on the track and is *formed* by interactions and sensations. This is explored further in Chapter Three as a key to understanding how the extreme sport transforms subjectivities and socialities.

2. Frictions

Figure 2.1: Nada and I practicing blocking

> The joy is instantaneous yet increasing for every hit. I feel Nada's shoulder hitting my shoulder, like a hammer hitting a nail, again and again on the same spot. My shoulder is hitting back, in sync with her hits. We bounce from side to side with each hit, away from each other between hits and towards each other to touch each other's shoulders with force generated by the sidewise movement. Hitting each other's shoulders, again and again and again. Nada's strong hits provoke my stubbornness; I hit harder; she hits harder. We are still hitting each other at exactly the same time in the same spots over and over. I feel my muscles burning. My core, upper body, and left arm are flexed. We are both in the derby position, bent knees, slightly bent forward, and with straight backs. Hitting harder than I ever imagined possible, I feel my body and I feel Nada's body: forces in friction—hitting, challenging, testing, and competing. We continue until Nada says, "Switch," promptly between breaths. We stop hitting. I rest my hands on my knees while catching my breath, smiling, exhausted, looking at Nada smiling back at me. Then we switch sides, count down, and start all over.
>
> (see Figure 2.1)

When describing the joy of hitting each other, recounting the fierce energy that overwhelms us when we push and push back, it seems absurd to insist that this is an exciting interaction, an ecstatic moment. Why would anyone love the feeling of someone hitting or pushing them? I enjoyed Nada hitting me and hitting her back partially because I take pride in enduring pain—it makes me feel strong and tough: I feel *badass* when I realize that I am able to embody pain and resist aggressions, physically and mentally. However, while connected to feelings of being strong and tough, the joy of smashing, hitting, blocking, pushing—let us call it, "the joy of extreme contact"—is more than just excitement motivated by pride of being tough. And while these interactions at times are physically painful, joy often overwhelms the pain. This joy of extreme contact is a sensation connected to the joy of engaging in violent behavior unapproved outside sports arenas. Hitting and being hit produce bodily feelings usually not felt or heavily censured outside the track. While hitting each other, players experience the joy of "going at it again and again and again," as Lynn, a former

player, described it—continuing stubbornly to push back against a force. In friction with team members and opponents, derby players experience the joy of repetitions and the ways in which repetition of the same movement during an exercise produces qualitatively different sensations as bodies get sore and exhausted.

The feelings of being hit and pushed in a drill as the one described above do not take players by surprise. In game situations (both the actual game of roller derby and warm-up games that mock elements of the game) however, players get excited when they are taken by surprise or take another player by surprise with a hard push. In conflict with rationale outside the track, derby players get excited when they fly through the air after another player pushes them. That is, when they do not get injured severely. There is an excitement to the loss of control that is elicited by surprise, sensed as a rush. On the derby track, *being surprised* by others and *surprising* others make agency and patiency interchangeable. Contrasting my practice with Nada, my playing with Alaa takes me by surprise, I scream out of joy, start chasing her (take her by surprise). Another example:

> Vanessa pushes Karima—a hard hit on the right shoulder. Karima anticipates the push in the last second and uses the force from Vanessa to get momentum enough to turn with her right shoulder as her axis, turning around and passing Vanessa. Still, Vanessa's push causes a slight misbalance. Nada Tunis, who is in front of Vanessa and also blocking, takes advantage of this slight misbalance, and pushes Karima on her left shoulder; she is out of the track.

Details, seconds, and slight misbalances are determents for the outcome of a game. Karima's last-second anticipation of Vanessa's push enabled her to make an unexpected move. Vanessa's agency turned to patiency—her force became an instrument for Karima's move. Still, Karima's misbalance caused her to receive a push from Nada passively. The ways in which agency-patiency are interchangeable on the

derby track demonstrate that frictions on the derby track work on both material and immaterial levels—frictions are shoulders against shoulders, air on skin, and skates to ground but also agencies in frictions with each other. On a third level, emotions and sensations are in friction with each other on the derby track: Sometimes, excitement and joy are in friction with other sensations. When players push each other, pain and joy connect; they become continuous sensations that overlap to that extent that we cannot tell one from the other. Living pain or exhaustion is exciting. Likewise, when players practice new skills, sensations are in friction with each other: Players are joyful and frustrated at the same time. That they do not succeed right away frustrates them; that they make progress induces joy. This joy comes from the rush that is elicited by an unfamiliar way of being in their bodies as well as pride in mastering a skill not previously mastered.

Frictions also include non-physical interactions: players yelling at each other, sternly discussing techniques and rules during and outside practice, and swearing at each other, themselves, or their skates. The interactions, which arise from *wanting this so much,* are intense and frictive, as Karima commented after practice one day. Towards the end of that practice, we fiercely discussed our performances after each scrimmage (and at times during): what was good, what could be improved, who had used their hands to push other players (not allowed). We yelled at each other. I felt angry and irritated at other players for disagreeing, and I sensed from their facial expressions and the volume of their yells, that these feelings were mutual. It was intense, frustrating, and enjoyable all at once. “There was so much energy,” Karima said after practice.

In sum, excitement on the derby track is sensing and living energy produced by various bodies. It is being overwhelmed by speed and force and energy exchanges that make the agency-patiency generally conceived of as binary in fact interchangeable. Excitement is the joy of being surprised by the possibilities bodies have; learning a new move, being pushed off the track and landing meters away from your starting point, and experiencing the ecstasy of skating fast around the track with peers motivated by their involvement in the game and each other.

B. Liberty and invincibility

> Roller Derby is the perfect mix of elegance and violence, beauty and aggression. It makes me feel invincible, like in that one moment in skates and on the track, I could do anything.
>
> Noor, former player (Roller Derby Beirut n.d.)

Liberty, while not ordinarily conceptualized as a sensation, is, I argue, felt and lived on the derby track. Sensing that in this moment, here and now on the derby track, I can do anything, I can make anything possible, I can be anyone, is a feeling of freedom and invincibility. I use "liberty" here not in the political sense of the word. Liberty on the derby track is neither freedom to act in a literal sense or absence of constraints. Rather, it is a feeling that in this moment, here and now, me, my body—we, our bodies, can make anything happen—are free to make everything possible. It is sensing pure potential; for oneself, for the team, for everything, even what seems completely disconnected from roller derby. When moving smoothly forward on skates, overwhelmed by joy and excitement, everything *feels* possible. Not only are movements possible that are not possible without skates and protective pads, but new physical

possibilities *feel* liberating, as players explicitly express. The new physical possibilities thus allow for reinterpretations of subjectivities and communities.

1. Feeling free

> Sea on one side, city on the other, we race between kids playing, men fishing, families strolling around, a group of joggers, three young women taking a selfie with the sea as their background, and a man with a kid on his shoulder. Nermine and Sumar, visiting players from CaiRollers, Alaa, Karima, and I have joined forces right before sunset. We are taking over the corniche in Beirut, stride by stride: five adult women, letting go of all control and reason, zigzagging between people. Some jump aside to make space for us, others don't, and we dodge between them. We dare to skate, jump, and fall in public. *We don't give a fuck*. We expect, believe, know that we can anticipate the changes on the surface on the ground, people's movements, and the curves of the road ahead of us. And when we fall, we get up, skate on, without losing faith in our abilities. This space is our space. This now belongs to us.

"Skating feels like flying," one player told me when I first joined the team. I had asked her why she liked skating, and her metaphor connoted that skating is living in space differently from what is possible without skates. The above description from a late afternoon in Beirut shows how this feeling is intensified when skating outside the derby track. When skating on the corniche, which is crowded with people, the contrast between wearing skates and not wearing skates becomes apparent; the passers-by become our alter egos: Restricted and slow. We, the skaters, are the ones who *don't give a fuck*[3]. Fast and energetic, we do not care how we look or how they see us because we have the ability to skate fast and take pride in it. Not giving a *fuck*, *damn*, *crap*, *shit*, and other creative phrases are explicit expressions of freedom. During interviews, players often translated these phrases into the politer, "I don't care what others think." On

[3] I do not expect the experiences of zipping around through public spaces and feeling free to be unique to skaters on the cornice. I imagine that this feeling-invincible is a feeling athlete share with the young males who I see racing parallel to the corniche in their cars, reckless and fast, probably *not giving a fuck*, in similar ways to us when we skate.

skates, politeness in phrasing is not a concern for players—I learned early in my fieldwork to use *I don't give a fuck* and the like to express my freedom—and, indeed, to expect and enact this freedom.

Skateboarding on the corniche, which I did a few times with Reem, a Beiruti skateboarder, is a similar experience. Passing by people full speed makes me feel freer than the people I pass by, as if I had superhuman powers. Here as well, *I did not give a fuck*. Skateboarders and derby players share this way of phrasing their liberation on wheels. What the foregoing emphasizes is that when players sense liberty while skating, it is often connected to how we use space—skating in public intensifies the collective experience that we are a remarkable group of women, able to take space in ways we do not take space without our skates on.

a. Gear or no gear

Figures 2.2 and 2.3: Pictures of a set of roller derby gear: Quad roller skates, knee pads, wrist pads, elbow pads, and a helmet

The ability to move differently, together with the sense of freedom and invincibility that new movements produce, are closely connected to gear. Skates enable smooth forward movements. Kneepads enable players to tap their knees on the ground while still in speed and get up again (knee tapping), which is an important way to regain balance if pushed. Roller derby gear (see Figures 2.2 and 2.3) works as extensions of the body on the field, give players unbreakable joints and rolling feet. Players use gear actively to move, fall, and get up. The Women's Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) emphasizes using gear and embeds it in the rules for play internationally (WFTDA Equipment n.d.). This emphasis starkly contrasts with the ways in which Reem, a skateboarder, described the necessity of *not* using protective gear:

> About falling, learning with no protection, that's important. That way you know how to fall. […] Once you get a few bails [fall off the board] without protection you start learning how to fall pretty much. Like when I first started skating, I would fall so stiff and actually injure myself. Now I have learned how to let go. Like, feel comfortable while falling. Like, know how to throw myself. You kinda gotta loosen up your body.
>
> (Reem, interviewed by author, Beirut, June 1st 2017)

Reem used expressions such as "falling naturally" and "letting go" while falling. The comfort of falling in the two sports, that share a high intensity and the interaction with wheels, contrasts in this way: in derby, players use the gear to fall and the knowledge of it as the basis for their trust that they will not get hurt. In skateboarding, embodied practices of "loosening the body" when falling (bailing in skateboard terminology), prevent injuries.

It is noteworthy that both practices, though contrastive, enforce a certain bravery—the trust that the fall will not break the practitioner. Ironically, derby players and skateboarders are much more likely to get injured when they fear falling. Overcorrections often result in uncontrolled falls on weaker parts of the body (protected by gear or not). I was taught at my first derby practice to throw myself to the ground, falling forwards and hitting the ground with my kneepads and wristpads, whenever I was losing balance. For me, I had to embody this lessons the hard way, as I did not follow the instructions when I first lost balance, overcorrected, fell to the side, twisted and sprained my ankle. Throwing myself to the ground was counterintuitive, *outside my comfort zone*, and I was afraid to do it. Through derby, players practice *getting out of their comfort zone* in order to *overcome fears and doubts* and gain belief in their invincibility. What I am saying, is that when we play derby, we, the players, become invincible because it makes us *feel* invincible.

2. Potentialities and invincibility

> The feeling of power and invincibility is astonishing […] Roller derby removes the constraints you put on yourself as doubt and [that are] limiting your capabilities. You explore and expand your skills and push yourself to realize your maximum abilities and explore your strengths. It makes you feel invincible when you find true strength and passion […]. It requires commitment and focus, and it gives you the sense of having

> your life together, so you are not breakable neither physically nor mentally because you endure the pain and discomfort to go out of your comfort zone and explore your true potential.
>
> (Ola, interviewed by author, Beirut, August 10th 2017)

Derby practice links feelings of freedom and invincibility to letting go of doubts and getting out of *your comfort zone*, as stated by Ola above. It is letting go of control, in the sense that acquiring technical skills involve a willingness to move your body in unpredictable ways and learning through failures. The ability to let go of control is connected to the embodied knowledge that limbs are protected by gear. When a player falls, she both learns how not to move on the skates and that falling does not break her. She is able to get up and skate on. As Ola states above, she feels unbreakable in different senses of the word when she is practicing derby, both physically and mentally. It gives her the feeling that she "has her life together." This suggests that sensations of invincibility relate to life outside the track. The exploration of one's "true potential" is likewise linked to the outside—where true potential has not (yet) been explored. Exploring potentialities—of strength, technique, and speed—produce feelings of being unbreakable and free from restrains of (self-) doubt and (self-) control. Moving freely, feeling like we could fly, players feel invincible and free on the track.

C. Pain and fear

> […] I just tried to push her [Nada Tunis]. She went past me, she already went past me, and then like… I slid a bit to the front, and then I fell, and when I fell, I felt my ankle twisting. And it twisted really hard actually, so it twisted, and I fell on it twisting. And it was painful as hell. It was like, a severe, severe pain, and I… I don't remember me screaming, but people told me that apparently I screamed when I like… When I fell… I don't remember that, I just remember that… What I do remember is that I started tearing up, 'cause of the pain, and then I couldn't say anything... Like I couldn't scream, I couldn't do, I couldn't talk, nothing.

> Everything was concentrated to kinda deal with that pain. And all the girls rushed to me. And then everyone looked so concerned.
> (Nada Yemen, interviewed by author, Beirut, August 2nd 2017)

Derby players sense pain at various intensities and qualitatively different ways: Pain engendered by bruising is not comparable to pain engendered by broken bones or sprained joints. Players sense pain when their muscles get sore and when they hit the ground or other players. Sore muscles and smaller bruises are well-known ways of feeling pain. Often, these mildly painful sensations engender joy and feelings of being tough and strong. Players sense sore muscles as pain located in specific parts of their bodies, often their thighs or their buttocks. With soreness, players sense their body in new ways; feeling muscles not otherwise felt, they sense development of muscles, which is joyful. Knowing that soreness is connected, in the physiological sense, to gaining stronger muscles, players feel strong when they feel sore. This is, at times, discussed on social media and face-to-face outside practices and outside the gym. Players brag about being sore and how much they pushed themselves. By corollary, players sense the absence of soreness as a lack. Players express this through texts messages such as, "Anyone wanna go to the gym tomorrow? I miss being sore."

Players experience more intense pain differently from mild feelings of pain. Intense pain overwhelms other sensations and generates panic and distress. When Nada fell (see quote above), the pain overpowered her, she could not *speak*, *scream*, or *do*. She was living the pain so intensely that she was disabled from doing anything but being in the pain. Her memory of the fall is marked by living the pain—not recalling that she screamed right when she fell or cramped up her whole body and shook. She

only recalls the pain and the look of concern on team members faces. The later being engendered by her scream and the cramping movements of her body on the ground.

The intensity of the pain does not always reflect the medical severity of the injury. The intensity of falling on your back and having the air pushed out of your lungs makes itself well known to many athletes, not just derby players. For fleeting seconds, which can feel like an eternity, nothing but panic and pain exist. Likewise, a hit to the tailbone can overpower even the toughest athlete. Both paralyze bodies momentarily while players live in the pain.

Pain in its various intensities makes people talk about it frequently: players talk about pain in moments right after a player hit the ground, let out a scream or cramp up, while other players gather around her. When a player is in pain right after a fall, she will, to the extent possible, describe the pain—its intensity and where it is centered on her body—in order to procure the help needed to avoid long-term injuries, by creating a prescription for aid (ice spray, elevation of a foot, etc.). This is not always possible right after a fall, as the quote from Nada above shows. In these cases, pain is discussed when the player is no longer overwhelmed. Pain even makes players talk about it outside practice in team gatherings and on the team's WhatsApp group where players share photos of bruises and descriptions of pain and soreness (see Figures 2.4–2.8). States of being in pain thus mark players' experiences both on and off the track.

1. Potential pain

Figures 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 2.7, and 2.8: Pictures of bruises and scratches that have been shared on the team's WhatsApp group

Pain on the derby track is present even when it is not actual. It is present as potential future pains and as past experiences with pain. It is present for non-injured team members through their connections to injured players. Pain transgresses bodies and becomes immaterial as it is shared amongst team members through connotations engendered by sounds and sights. Roller derby, like most high-intensity physical sports, has a high risk of injuries. Falls happen several times during each practice. Sometimes, especially during game situations, players cannot control or even predict falls. Unpredicted falls are with high chances of twisting joints, falling on limbs, falling on other players, or merely hitting the ground with unprotected or vulnerable body parts (head, tailbone, etc.). All players know the potential dangers of the game. Some of us have experienced medically severe injuries on our own bodies. We have all experienced teammates getting severe injuries, such as broken bones. We have heard screams, seen players cramp up, visited each other at the hospital, and helped long-term injured players with their daily tasks. All of these experiences make pain and risk ever pressing on the derby track.

Players' use of social media's sharing features, as noted above, makes pain a collective sensation. When players share photos of their bruises and scratches (see Figures 2.4–2.8), their pain is also being shared. When I receive such messages, I contemplate the pain, live it for a second, let out a sound— "Ouch!"—and sometimes reply with comments like "Damn!" "Wow!" or "Nice!" Such comments both convey my respect for the player who endures the pain but also functions as an active participation in the pain. When pain transgress bodies a collectiveness emerges: we live each other's pains. Living sensations collectively is part of living each other's lives as close-kin (see Chapter 3 for a discussion of kinship amongst derby players). Living pain collectively outside practice feeds back into living potential pain while playing; it forms new connotations—new potential future pains.

2. Fears

It is tempting to assume that fear on the derby track is clearly tied to potential pain caused by a fall or a hit. Since pain is, as discussed above, a sensation that players often vocalize and a sensation that is ever present on the field in its immaterial form, it causes apprehensions. This does not imply that fears on the derby track have a clear object such as potential pain. Sometimes fear arises suddenly, in the middle of a drill. For example, a player who is practice-jumping may not dare jump over a line of cones and may instead step over them, even though she has made this jump previously. Nada Tunis avoided jumping several times doing a practice, and when I asked her what she was afraid of, she answered, "I don't know. I just can't get myself to do it."

Various factors engender fears. Some are specific to the track, while others cannot be comprehended without making connections to off- track lives. Potential pain

is but one of these factors. When players fall, they risk more than just pain. Long-term injuries can be immobilizing. Nada Yemen, for example, had her leg in a cast for six weeks after her injury. She explained to me that she stopped playing derby after she broke her ankle mostly due to the fear of having to rely on others and be limited by an immobile foot again. Other players have stopped for similar reasons—either after a painful, but not medically severe, injury or a long-term injury that immobilized them. Based on interviews, other derby-based fears include fears of embarrassment, of being a weak player *and dragging down the team*, and of injuring others.

With long-term injuries being a serious risk of the game, fear of causing injury to others marked my early experiences with the sport. Being both stronger, broader, and taller than some players, I found myself afraid of pushing them off the track and causing them harm. Nada Tunis dismissed my fear as counterproductive to the team's progress when I shared it with her: "You have to get over it! We have to push each other."

Fears are sensed by all players, but the intensity varies. I sensed fears more intensely when I was an inexperienced player. Other players have, based on my interviews, *overcome* fears as well. It was doing falling exercises, enduring pain, and realizing that fears often are obstacles for improvement that helped many players overcome fears. Especially fresh meat (new players) also sense fears of failure or embarrassment over not performing well. "I was scared of embarrassment," Alaa said in her description of the first time she played derby. "Now, I don't care how much I fall," she continued. Other players told me anecdotes about the ways in which they were afraid to stand up on the skates the first time they put them on. These early fears were a laughing matter in many of my interviews, as it is hard for us to re-imagine their intensity. We have fallen down enough to not be embarrassed and to know that injuries

pass, pain passes, and that most of the times all that happens is that we get a good laugh and experience rushes of excitement in the moments where we lose control. This being said, introduction of new techniques gives players the feeling of being inexperienced again and triggers fear anew.

D. Strength and toughness

> I stick out my tongue and wink at Karima. I feel proud, victorious, and tough. Moments before, during a scrimmage, Karima was jamming, I was the Mamma[4]. She passed the first three blockers, but I managed to push her with my chest until she fell. Now, after she got up again, she is giving me the finger because I was stronger than her in this moment. I stopped her; I prevented her from succeeding in her quest to pass the blockers. This *fuck you* is the sincerest compliment I could imagine on the derby track, a *fuck you for being tough and strong*.

Roller derby requires physical and mental strength. Physical strength is an advantage as weaker players are more likely to fall due to a push or to fail at blocking opponents or passing them. Likewise, derby requires courage—players have to thrust themselves "outside their comfort zone," as Ola described it, in order to acquire technical skills and play the game. Strength and toughness on the derby track are both lived as sensations and conceptualized as ideal characteristics of derby players. Derby communities celebrate these traits by complimenting each other's muscles off and on the track and each other's performances on the track. Enduring pain garners respect. After Nada Yemen's injury, some players advocated to change her derby name *Princess* to *Wolverine*—she had lived through pain and distress and earned a "tougher" nickname. Additionally, other players' acknowledgment of one another's toughness or strength stimulates feelings of being tough and strong, as the example from scrimmage

[4] The Mamma is a position a blocker can take where she stands in front of the three other blockers to support them when they are pushed by the jammer. The Mamma often ends up in a one-on-one duel against the jammer after the jammer has passed the other blockers.

above shows. Karima was, not without irony, showing me both her middle fingers in a gesture I have not seen her do outside the track and would not be happy to see outside derby practice. On the track, however, it was an acknowledgement of a fellow player's abilities, mental and physical, a sign of respect—something I was honored to receive.

Strength and toughness on the derby track are, at times, shared sensations—shared amongst blockers when the wall they form with their bodies is impossible for the jammer to break through. Sometimes toughness and strength are relational experiences. For example, when two players compete in drills or during the game, as when Nada and I hit each other's shoulders over and over to practice blocking, we are competing to be stronger or tougher (endure more pain) than other players. Despite this often fierce competition, we share strength-feelings when there is no clear winner and loser, as it is in most cases. On the other hand, sometimes when competing against other players, players lose or feel inferior, and this can engender feelings of weakness or mediocrity. Often, other players will try to prevent or counteract such sensations by complimenting each other for the *good fight* they put up.

1. Mental and physical power

> If you're mentally not in the game, you're physically not in the game. They both are obviously correlated easily. You can be physically tired but mentally focused, but that doesn't help. So you can't have one without the other.
>
> (Nadia, soccer player and coach, interviewed by author, Beirut, July 26th 2017)

Nadia's description of the ways in which athletes need to be *mentally* in the game to be *physically* in the game suggests a connection between physical and mental abilities and characteristics in high-intensity sports. As a former player for the Lebanese

national team and several professional soccer clubs, and as the founder of a female soccer academy, Nadia has worked with both professional and amateur athletes. She emphasized the importance of mental and physical focus on all levels. Physical exhaustion or incapacities, as well as mental enervation and lack of focus, mark experiences on the field in undesirable ways. Both hinder a player from performing well.

In roller derby, as well, mental and physical abilities connect. Practice intertwines mental and physical aspects. This is perhaps best exemplified by the relation between (physical) strength and (mental) toughness—physical abilities (strength and technique), and especially experiences of those abilities' improvement, foster mental strength, i.e. bravery and gumption. On the other hand, the feelings of having a bad day on the track—being exhausted either physically or mentally—discourage players and become self-reinforcing. Mental exhaustion's effect on the ways in which players perform on the track is especially evident during exam periods. As most of the players are students, practices towards the semester's end tend to be populated by absent-minded players. One player's exhaustion can affect the whole team. During finals the drills and the games become less structured as no one really focuses on their tasks. Players who are absent-minded will make more mistakes and fall more—mostly towards the end of a practice. Encouragement of team members is thus an essential social component to derby practices—by enforcing feelings of success, strength, and pride over technical performances, players help each other improve and stay mentally and physically focused.

2. Lifting weights, getting bulky, becoming stronger

I go to the gym together with other team members (at the American University of Beirut), where we lift weights in ways that only few women do in this gym. We deadlift, bench, squat, do rows, and overhead triceps extensions. When we, as a group, lift heavy weights, we feel a burning sensation in our muscles, our heartbeats raising, and the sweat running down our faces. We see sweat dripping down on the floor and our reflections in the mirror—flexed muscles in controlled movements—moving in sync with each other. We hear our heavy breaths. We become strong, both in the physical and the non-physical sense, as we lift together, feel burning and sweat. We comment on the ways in which our bodies change over time; the ways in which muscles get marked and upper bodies get bulky. With sore muscles as reminders outside the gym and outside derby practice, we feel our muscles getting stronger. We experience how we can lift heavier and heavier weights in the gym. From compliments, new abilities to lift more, and sore muscles, players get motivated to play derby more fiercely, they feel braver, tougher, stronger, and believe that physical and mental strength enables them to take risks and challenge themselves and each other on and off the track.

E. Temporality and spatiality on the derby track

When we, Beiruthless, play derby, we make space for changing space and time for changing time. We allow ourselves a to experiment with movement and transmutation through the ways in which we use and structure time and space on the track: We move in sync and counter other player's movements and by doing this explore time and space through mirroring how other players use time and space, we investigate speed and distances and experience speed as frictions from air on skin and a

tickling in our midriffs rather than as something measurable, and we develop new ways of skating, jumping, and pushing—personal styles of living the time-space that is derby practice.

In this section, I deal with spatiality and temporality on the track on different levels. I move from derby conceptions of time and space to a discussion of abstract time and space through derby-based sensations. Throughout this section, I use jumping-practice as an ethnographic example to discuss space and time on the track. Other elements of derby practices could have been as productive in some paragraphs, but given that jumping encompasses many ways of living and constructing time and space, it offers my most efficient example to integrate the analyses in this section. Jumping is a skill that has many variations in relation to use of time and space as well as the ways in which time and space are perceived on the track. Furthermore, jumping is the ultimate *badass skill*, which players develop in infinite ways. The skill of jumping advances over time and will never be fully mastered. A player can always develop new ways of jumping and improve known ways of jumping.

On the derby track, we observe time and space in relation to elements of the game. Derby players think of space in terms of *blockers zone*, *edges*, *jammer line*, as well as *inside the track* and *outside the track*. We experience space in relation to zones, space between players, and the space we physically can occupy with our bodies (when blocking another players). While the referee takes time (with a clock counting down the two minutes each jam maximum takes), the players' sense time by taking laps and through the different elements of the game. There is the period before the whistle's blow, the interval between the blow of the whistle and the jammer's reaching the

blockers, and the time it takes a jammer to take a lap. These intervals of time (and space) are all marked by qualitatively different sensations. Importantly, these sensations differ not only between the phases but also in relation to the position a player takes on the team, whether one is blocking or jamming, and the various courses scrimmages take. While the jammer is in motion from the beginning of the game (from the whistle's blow that marks the beginning of a jam), the blockers wait a few second until the jammer reaches the pack. And while the jammer moves through space voluntarily from the beginning of the game, the blockers are moved by a push from the jammer after the jammer reaches the pack of blockers. The sensation *being ready* marks the seconds blockers wait, not moving, while flexing muscles and effort to unite into a single wall the jammer cannot penetrate. A sudden rupture breaks this intense waiting. A push from behind presses forward and breaks the waiting embodied in the stable positions of the blockers: A forced movement. This intense *now* marks the beginning of a struggle. The ways in which players sense temporal and spatial aspects of the game are not limited to the above-mentioned temporal and spatial derby categories. It is exactly in intensified moments during practices and game situations, in intense *heres* (derby track, blockers zone, etc.) and *nows*, where time and space collapse, that there is opening for transformations and transgressions. The next two subsections deal with temporal and spatial collapses during derby practice and forefront a discussion taken up in Chapter 3 about the ways in which temporal and spatial changes affect bodies and subjectivities.

1. Spatial collapses

Figures 2.9, 2.10, 2.11, 2.12, 2.13, 2.14, 2.15: Hadeel jumping over cones while turning 180 degrees

> I watch as Hadeel skates towards the line of cones with a slow, steady speed. I'm next in line, behind her, observing and learning from her technique. Hadeel's knees bend slightly and her upper body leans forward. From the spectator's point of view, her balance is jarring and incredible. When she reaches the cones, she lifts her feet off from the ground. As she jumps up over the cones, she turns 180 degrees in the air. Her arms rise up in the air for an instant, then spread out to the sides when she lands. *Thunk!* The sound of plastic hitting concrete reverberates. As she lands, Hadeel bends again her knees to gain balance and continue her now backwards movement, a technique we call sticky-skating. Obstacle overcomed with elegance.

Skates allow players to move in space in new ways. The example above is not possible without wheels. Jumping, turning 180 degrees, and then gliding backwards are impossible on human feet. The momentum of the running jump would dissolve into the ground when we land on our feet and might push us forward to the point of losing our balance. When we land on wheels, however, using the right techniques the momentum persists and our bodies follow. Skates produce a feeling of freedom in relation to space—we experience our movements as unlimited—and spatial boundaries are not linear anymore, space is neither measurable nor quantifiable in derby experiences, but abstracted always related to the outside space as a contrast (freedom of moving through space with skates vs. limitations of being a walker).

The above description of Hadeel jumping is about movements. Movements on the track have to do with spaces both on and off the track. The process of learning to move in new ways elicits feelings of freedom. Movements in gear sharply contrast the

ways in which we, as young women, move without gear, especially in public spaces. Without gear and skates, we often feel restricted and self-aware. The contrast to the lack of feeling free outside derby time-spaces provokes feelings of freedom in gear and skates. Because outside spaces are present on the derby track through the ways in which we sense the contrast between the two, the outside impacts our derby-based sensations. At the same time, the sensations we experience on the derby track transform the ways in which we experience ourselves in outside spaces. In these ways, outside and inside the track relate to and impact each other, meaning derby-based sensations may elicit feelings of power and strength outside the track. For example, Nada Tunis told me about a recent instance of public harassment. She explained that she did not feel fear, as opposed to how she felt earlier in her life when encountering in-public harassment, because she knew that she could "beat up the guy."

The above discussion further relates to the ways in which players use space outside practice. Through derby practice, weightlifting, and in-public skating, we have taught each other and ourselves new ways of *taking space*. As I will show in Chapter 3, this sets the stage for young women *taking up space*—physically and symbolically: through derby based sensations in relation to space on the track. We, the players, change our perception of the ways in which female bodies can, should, and will take up space in other places.

2. Temporal collapses

> My turn. I take a few strides, then continue the forward movement without adding speed. I am standing on the skates with my knees bent. I know that behind me is an audience, Ola and Vanessa are waiting and observing, just as I observed Hadeel. *NOW*! I take a deep breath, stretch out my arms and push down with my feet, moving up from the ground. My left hand a bit out to the side, I swing it around to get more momentum. I turn, with my right shoulder as

> an axis, and switch the direction of my head, upper body, my left arm, and my hips rapidly. My lower body follows. *Thunk!* Both arms swing out to the sides to reclaim balance, knees flexibly bent. My eyes sternly stare straight back to the waiting players. I roll backwards for a few seconds. My heart pumps fast, and I can hear my rapid breaths. Relieved and proud, *I made the jump*. I continue backwards by sticky-skating.

My most intense sensory memory from jumping practice is the instant when my body agrees to jump. This is not the moment when I made the decision; that happened when I started taking strides. Rather, it is the moment when my body initiates the jump. When I choose the *here* and *now*—where and when to initiate my jump—it is not a clear, conscious decision, but as a reflexive response to seeing the cones approaching (technically I am approaching the cones, but in experience they are getting closer to me, again space). I bend down on my knees until I realize that this is the best possible position from which to take the jump. I know, my body knows, from experience. I remember these intense *nows* as a rush of excitement and fear, as an instance when I cannot distinguish between the two rushing feelings, overwhelming and forcing my body to take *the leap*—to initiate the jump.

Intense moments suspend linear time. As Massumi explains:

> Intensity would seem to be associated with nonlinear processes: resonation and feedback that momentarily suspend the linear progress of the narrative present from past to future. Intensity is qualifiable as an emotional state, and that state is static—temporal and narrative noise. It is a state of suspense, potentially of disruption. It is like a temporal sink, a hole in time, as we conceive of it and narrativize it. (Massumi 2002:26)

Intensity on the derby track is exactly a qualifiable emotional state; overwhelming to an extent that makes players seek ways out of the intensity: they take the jump, let out a scream, or throw themselves to the ground. Intensity intensifies if we do not find a departure—often engendering panic and rash decisions. Intensity marks the beginning of a selection of paths (Massumi 2002:30). Since we embody knowledge of possible

paths from prior experiences, derby players become more likely to actualize some paths than others. After I initiate a jump, all movements become reflexive—embodied responses to the motion my body just initiated, intuitively based on prior jumps. In these intensified *heres* and *nows,* the slightest variation changes the outcome of move. By falling while practicing jumping, countless times, and often in uncontrolled ways, I have learned that if my core is not stable (enough) and my knees not flexible (enough) when I land, I lose control—sometimes just resulting in a slight misbalance, other times I smash to the ground hitting the floor with my kneepads and my wristpads. At worst, I overcorrect, and fall backwards. The last fall is painful. It is falls I seek to avoid by all means; when falling these ways, my body learns the hard way to correct my technique. Never land again with stiff knees. Never again land without contracting my core muscles. I embody the knowledge of what not to do as the consequences of an unfocused moment.

These reflections on what my body knows from experience only exist as outside-practice rationalizations—while jumping, my body knows feelings and ways of sensing, it knows more than it is aware of, I embody knowledge that I have attempted to write out here but which exists in details—I cannot vocalize the position my knees have to have when land from I jump, I can merely feel it. The first time I encountered jumping practice, Nada Tunis emphasized the importance of bending knees several times before I took my first jump. While I take her advice seriously and try to follow it, her words cannot compare to bodily knowledge. Players are aware of this factor; Karima often encourages players to experiment with derby moves to figure out what works for them. These bodily ways of learning rank higher than knowledge transmitted from player to player through vocal explanations.

Derby-based movements and sensations feed back into previous movements and sensations and feed-forward into future ones. Previous experiences with jumping impact the ways bodies respond to what they sense (misbalance, height, position of knees, e.g.). Likewise, sensing jumping feeds-forward: experimentation opens up for new possibilities and new variations of movements. These kinds of "[f]eedback and feed-forward, or recursivity, […] folds the dimensions of time into each other" (Massumi 2002:15). In other words, past, present, and future collapse: Sensations transgress distinctions between temporal phases on a clock face. Linear time collapses as we feel the emergence of new possibilities and passed transformations. During many of my interviews, improvements were vocalized through phrases such as "I used to be so afraid" or "I was scared of embarrassment," to refer to a player's neophyte experience. These reflections on early experiences stand in sharp contrast to how players experience themselves now. Thus, derby provokes an experience of self that exists in contradiction to past experiences. Likewise, the emergence of new possibilities arises from a striving to become derby players and live in this becoming, improving and seeking to improve further.

3. Detemporalization, despatialization, and moving in sync

The ethnographic descriptions in this chapter include onomatopoeias such as *thunk* and *shusssh*. My fieldnotes includes many more onomatopoeias: describing skates' squeaking when a player breaks by plowing with one skate; sounds of uncontrolled falls (a player landing on her back, e.g.); screams, roars, laughter, and much more. These sounds vary in volume and length. Writing such sounds into my field notes was unsatisfying. Like sensations generally, sounds are not well represented by letters. Nevertheless, also like sensations, sounds matter greatly to the derby experience.

They add to *the joy of moments* on the track the way a soundtrack adds to the mood of a movie. Sounds, sights, touch, and sensing movements proprioceptively—internally in the body—engender feelings of togetherness; a *flow* on the derby track that exists in and between physical bodies and the immaterial body of the derby sisterhood. Experience of this flow corresponds to what Jonathan Shannon describes as states of *detemporalization* in his analysis of Tarab performances (Shannon 2003:85-7). He describes how "[m]elodic repetition and fluency of movement create this sense of suspended time" (Shannon 2003:85). Repetitive sounds on the derby track, such as the sound friction between wheels and the ground makes when players are taking strides, *shusssh, shusssh,* contribute to this *sense of suspended time* and breaks the rhythms of quotidian life. The same goes for repetition of movements and, thus, repetitions of proprioceptive feelings of movements: these convert linear time into altered temporalities in the experiences of derby players. These experiences are, like the musical experiences analyzed by Shannon, "never the same but rather cumulative and anticipatory" (Shannon 2003:86). Derby-based sensations relate to previous experiences through repetitions and to future experiences through expectations of repetitions yet to come. When players are *in the flow*, for example while skating around the track together, they are, like musical audiences in Shannon's example, "brought to a different world where altered temporalities structure experiences and frame meanings" (Shannon 2003:87).

This altered temporality on the derby track is both past, present, and future—it is in this collapse of linear time that we, the players, sense liberty, excitement, pain, and toughness differently from outside the track. Shannon's phrase, "brought to a different world," indicates that temporal and spatial alterations happen simultaneously. Building

on Shannon, I argue that while playing derby we also experience a spatial movement, a *despatialization*: we are not bound by the physical space of the track. As mentioned earlier, derby-based sensations exist in contrast to off-track sensations, never *without* off-track sensations. These collapses in measurable space and linear time—interlinking the track and outside spaces, the past, present, and future of the players—foster a range of sensations specific to the derby track. The derby track's peculiar time-space enables players to experiment with their very being in relation to their temporarily departed surroundings. Here-now players *affect* other bodies (material and immaterial) and receive *affect* from other bodies in new ways. I use *affect* to describe modes of mind and body that involve a transition from one state of being to another (Massumi 1991:xvi). Affect, as Eve K. Sedgwick teaches, is not synonymous with "feelings" or "emotions" because it is not confinable or locatable to an individual. Additionally, *affect* does not submit well to qualification, for it roams temporally and spatially without settling into one or another social mode. This is in opposition to sensing pain after a fall, for example, which is physically located on the body, and happens in a clearly defined interval of time. Affects can evolve within seconds or over long periods of time and do not have any specific object (Sedgwick 2003:18-9). Players' ability to affect and be affected are in play, for example, when patiency-agency become interchangeable during game interactions. Player may not consciously experiment with states of being during derby practice, but they certainly learn and relearn what it "means" to be a derby player. The ways in which players affect and receive affect on the track are not controlled, conscious, or with a clear aim. Derby practice is chaotic, emotionally and physically, and foster transmutations out of our control and and in unpredictable ways. Affect is key to understanding the stakes of playing a high-intensity

physical sport, as variations in bodies capacities to act, to affect and be affected, transform players and foster changes in their off-track lives. While affects must not be confused with sensations, affects foster sensations and feelings when bodies transform.

One of the sensations that derby practice engender, is communal feelings, or in Victor Turner's terminology *communitas*, which I discuss in Chapter 3. For now, I note that bonds of connectedness arise in these spaces and envelop players who express this togetherness by moving in sync (see Figures 2.16–2.19).

Figures 2.16, 2.17, 2.18, and 2.19: Karima and Alaa jumping in sync

I have watched the video sequence of Karima and Alaa jumping in sync countless times. (See Figures 2.16–2.19) I watched it in slow motion and in reverse slow motion. I have clicked through it frame by frame. Whilst watching it, I have considered over and again why this sequence fascinates me so. Instinctively, there is something aesthetically pleasing to the symmetry in their jumps. But my fascination is not limited to the visual pleasure afforded by their moves. I know the technical difficulty in controlling jumps temporally and spatially and I admire and respect their

skills. Not just are they jumping at the same time, they jump with the same distance to the line of cones. They then move over the cones simultaneously and land on the same time with a loud *Thunk! Thunk!* from both their skates (the temporal distance between the sounds of the two *thunks*, small as it is, reveals that in sync is never fully in sync, but merely appears to be). Even though my technical admiration of this sequence is part of my fascination, I think, in my off-track rationalization, that this instance exemplifies the togetherness of derby and that is precisely what makes me re-watch the video again and again.

As I learned from derby practice, these synchronized moments are the ultimate ways of living time-space together. When we move in sync on the track, e.g. skating in a baseline same speed with a short distance between players, my *I* is suspended. My individual improvements are suspended; we improve together. Linear time is suspended. Insides and outsides collapse. We feel outside the times and spaces where careers, families, or societies form our behavior. Moving together, in sync, detemporalizes and despatializes our experiences. We are in a shared flow, connected and living in this connection. We are improving synchronously in ways we cannot do alone. We share sensations of excitement, liberty, and power. These sensations are engendered by togetherness in altered time-spaces. When we skate fast around the track everything but the shared movement seems insignificant.

F. Becoming derby players

In the preceding sections of this chapter, I have explored sensations on the derby track in their qualitatively manifold appearances. I have discussed how these sensations affect time and space and how spatial and temporal alterations engender

sensations of togetherness. In this section, I move to an investigation of the ways in which derby-based movements and sensations foster qualitative transformations of individual players as well as the community of players. On the derby track, bodies move and sense simultaneously—it is in this "intrinsic connection between movement and sensation" (Massumi 2002:1), in intensified *heres* and *nows* where linear time and measurable space collapse, that bodies transform. Playing derby equates to living in the processes of *becoming derby players*. Processes of becoming engender sensations and are formed by sensations. In these processes, we actualize our potential to vary by experimenting with movements and sensations. The realness of becoming in itself, living in process, is described by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Gauttari in the following way:

> Becoming produces nothing other than itself. We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes. (Deleuze & Gauttari 1991[1980]:238)

This is exactly what is at stake when derby players are enabled to rethink their subjectivities: We roller derby players are living in our becomings. We neither imitate nor are; we *become*. We become strong(er) or (more) liberated, we are not reaching a *strongest* or *freest* endpoint—We live the *becoming stronger* and *becoming freer*. We sense our transitions as we live them—live them as we sense them. Again, this goes back to potentiality: We experience that we have the potential to become strong and liberated *as we feel* strong and liberated. Or, put differently, we feel strong and liberated *as we live* in the becoming-strong and becoming-liberated. Both sensation and becoming here relate to affective encounters between bodies. When we become derby players, we are living experimental states of being that mix and overlap. We engage

with bodies, material and immaterial, that facilitate the transition from one state of being into another. In sum, we engage with bodies of social, material, and physical quality that affect our bodies and are affected by our bodies.

In this chapter, I have explored sensations in their different qualities and intensities on the derby track. Sensations such as excitement, liberty, pain, and toughness participate in each other, are shared not solitary, and simultaneously exists in temporal and spatial collapses and foster those collapses. These derby-based sensations foster qualitative transformations of individual players as well as the community of players, transformations that feed back and engender sensations. These sensations are essential to being a part of Beiruthless. This being Beiruthless is not embodying a static set of characteristics or a stable identification. Rather it is a constant becoming, a becoming that is already initiated, but that is not yet, not ever, fully accomplished. Or rather, a becoming that is real in itself. Such becoming should not point us to a process towards actually turning into an ideal derby player or self. This *becoming Beiruthless* is the emergence of characteristics associated with being a roller derby player through practices on the track. Being on the derby track, living in *becoming derby players*, are affective ways of living in pasts and (future) potentialities unfolding in the present and in outside spaces that present them selves on the derby track in their negations. Think of this through the case of pain discussed in this chapter: pain present itself as potential future pains and past experiences with pain and affect the ways players control their muscles on skates in order to avoid falls and ultimately pain—pain strives for attention as potential futurities and past experiences in the present, unfolds the dimensions of

time, and change the intensities of interactions on the track as players fight to gain or keep control or loose control, switch between agency and patiency.

As derby players make space for changing space, and time for changing time, roller derby practice largely negates outside structures, proffering a Turnerian antistructure. In the following chapter, I investigate the ways in which, structured into liminal zones, derby-based sensations, provide opportunities for rediscovering subjectivities as players.

CHAPTER III

SUBJECTIVITIES

> Roller Derby allows me to be my true self. And it helps me liberate both my body and mind.
>
> (Karima, interviewed by author, Beirut, June 24th 2017)

Karima's saying that roller derby allows for her to *be her true self*, triggers an obvious follow-up question: What does it mean *to be one's true self?* Does Karima have a true self? And if so, what other selves does she have? Fake selves? Performances of self that do not coincide with her self-perception? Selves that are posing and acting for the surroundings? Is her *true self* less performative than her other selves? Are those selves clearly divided? A way to think about these questions opens up through the second part of her statement: roller derby allows Karima to *liberate* her body and mind. In affect-attendant terms, derby practice allows for her to experience herself as free(r), in contradiction to how she experiences herself outside the track, to sense her body and her subjectivity in new ways and rediscover who she can be. Roller derby enables Karima to become a self that is in harmony with who she perceives herself as and who she wishes to become. What I will show in this chapter is that the structuring of practice sessions and the sensations the structure engendered make possible this *becoming*—the emergence of a new self.

This chapter deals with the *time* and *space* where players experiment with subjectivities outside their usual ways of being. It explores the ways in which sensations get organized into liminal zones for rediscovering subjectivity by bringing players together to make time for changing time, make space for changing space. Temporal and

spatial rediscoveries go hand in hand with living in processes of (self-)discovery on the track. This chapter opens up for a discussion of change and becoming: To be, or rather become, one's true self approximates the trope of being true to oneself with the important linguistic difference that *one's true self* implies the existence of multiple selves. Thus, to become one's true self is an experience rather than a material manifestation: the becoming is not responding to an essential self or to attained characteristics. The *becoming* is, as I argued towards the end of Chapter 2, real in itself: We, the players, are *becoming* new selves more than we *are* those new selves. This becoming is a collective; we discover our potentials collectively through shared derby-based sensations and through affective ways of transforming our capacities to act. These sensations engender communal feelings in altered time-spaces—communal feelings that feedback and engender sensations, qualitatively and intensely different from the sensations that engender them in the first place. In the liminal zone that constitutes derby practice, players are *betwixt and between* their ordinary selves—they are living outside the structures of societies that they feel obliged to obey to elsewhere. The analysis of liminal zones here derives from Victor Turner's theories of liminality (cf. Turner 1991[1969] and Turner 1987[1988]). Liminality, while originating from Turner's discussion of ritual processes (inspired by Arnold van Gennep), applies to various social situations.[5] Here, I employ the term to discuss the ways in which female athletes who participate in high-intensity physical sports are enabled to reflect upon their *gendered*, *aged*, and *social* selves in altered structures. These altered structures, as

[5] Victor Turner himself applied the term to various cultural processes including films, literature, concerts, carnivals, and rites of passage (cf. Turner 1991[1969] and Turner 1987[1988]).

discussed in Chapter Two, give space and time for players to sense themselves, each other, and the worlds they live in anew.

Liminality refers to states of transitions and ambiguity (Turner 1991[1969]:95,106). It is a complex phase in which liminal personas reflect upon their realities and subjectivities (Turner 1987[1988]:102-3). Liminality and liminal personas are characterized by ambiguity since they "elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (Turner 1991[1969]:95). Liminal personas live in an anti-structure—a structure different from the structure outside of the liminal zones (Turner 1991[1969]:95-97). Derby players, whilst living in the anti-structure of the track, experiment with behavior in ways unheard of outside derby time-space. They experiment with violence and affections, confrontations and passivities, control and chaos. They do so in time-spaces where they are "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner 1991[1969]:95). The derby track as a time-space strives for reflectivity: Who am I and who can I become? Who are we as a collective and who can we become? The derby track, while provoking these reflections, provides new ways of coming into being as women, adults, friends, and kin.

Before derby practice there is waiting and longing. What follows is a journey through a practice session; beginning with separation from outside structures and transition into derby-structures, running through technical trainings and scrimmages, and ending with the players stepping back into the outside worlds. Because of the subjective transitions engendered by on-the-track sensations, derby practices impact the outside worlds we players inhabit. Towards the end of this chapter, I investigate the

presence of the track outside the track and the becomings of new selves as a symptom of off-on track connections.

A. Waiting for practice

Beiruthless practice every Sunday. Sometimes, we meet at AUB's dorms gate and go together to Collège du Sacré Coeur in Gammayze, where we rent a basketball court from the school. Other times, we meet at the court. We practice for two hours, either at night or in the afternoon, depending on players' schedules and the court's availability. Derby marks an exception point in the daily lives of us players and we live and relive practice time-spaces outside the track: we talk about our longing for practice during the week, either face-to-face or online, and we send each other pictures from last week's practice on social media. When the week finally reaches Sunday, I often find myself waiting for practice all day. With constant reminders on social media, my longing is intensified:

> All day this Sunday, notifications pop up on my phone. The *Roller Derby Beirut* WhatsApp group is active. "Guys, don't forget. Practice today," Alaa writes at 10.41. Still nine hours to practice, I check if I have my gear ready. Or rather, I check again; I checked yesterday and this morning as well. Other players respond with heart-emojis, an emoji of a flexed arm, and an emoji of a hand gesture. "Nada, do we have extra skates?" Hadeeel asks a little later. One of her friends wants to try derby. This is followed by a long conversation about which players have extra gear and skates and in what seizes.
>
> "Anyone leaving now from Sea Gate?" Karima writes at 6.30. Players who want to leave from the same place agree on time. Today, I will meet the rest of the team at the Collège du Sacré Coeur. I am going with Alaa who is at my place, hanging out, talking about our workout schedule, our studies, and her summer visit to her family. She cannot wait to get to practice; this is the first time since she got back to Beirut, and she seems impatient while we wait for the time to near 7, so we can take a service to Gemmayze and meet with the rest of the team.

The active WhatsApp group testifies to the importance of roller derby in the lives of the players. The time Beiruti derby players set aside for practice—extracted from daily schedules characterized by exams, papers, jobs, internships, and everyday exhaustion—marks an exceptional point in our week. "It's the highlight of my week," Nada Tunis told me. Other players have used similar expression in interviews with journalists and with me. Roller derby is something to look forward to—a hobby that makes quotidian life make sense for the players. In Pierre Bourdieu's terminology, roller derby operates as an *illusio*: "[…] a fundamental belief in the interest of the game [social game in a specific field/setting] and the value of the stakes which is inherent in that membership" (Bourdieu 2000[1997]:11). *Illusio* denotes "a self that invests itself emotionally and libidinally in what is likely to make life meaningful" (Hage 2009:66). Roller derby players invest in the sport because they share the feeling that it gives their lives meaning, not as an intellectual after-rationalization, but *in experience*. As Ghassan Hage argues, drawing on Bourdieu; "[…] by giving meaning to things outside us we give meaning to ourselves" (Hage 2009:68)[6]. This insight suggests that roller derby players give meaning to their lives by exploring themselves in altered structures, exploring what selves they can become, and as they live in that becoming, life gains new meaning. Let us start by noticing that derby time-spaces call for changes in quotidian life. Amongst other factors, it demands fit bodies:

> When Alaa and I arrive in at the school, Karima, Nahla, Weim, Nada Tunis, Nada Yemen, and Arwa are already there. Afnan, Ola, and Hadeel arrive all arrive a little later. We hug and kiss cheeks, ask how everyone is doing, and talk about last time we saw each other at a pub, as we put down our heavy bags on the side of the court. When Afnan and Ola arrive, we warm up without skates. Karima, who often functions as our coach, directs us to do *jumping jacks*, *knee lifts*, *ass kicks*, *heel reaches*, *superhero stretches*, and *bear crawls*,

[6] Ghassan Hage uses illusio to discuss how emotional attachments to a nation can bring meaning to one's life (Hage 2009:68). I use the term here to refer to a hobby that makes life meaningful. I draw on Hage because his case relates factors that seem outside of individuals to their perception of self.

> as we stand in a circle in the middle of the court. The last exercise, the bear crawls, engenders multiple complaints, as it is a demanding exercise. But there's no mercy, we have not played for a long time and need to get back into shape.

Warming up without skates marks a getting-ready phase before the actual practice. Warming up muscles and getting the blood flowing enables players to enter the practice setting. At the same time, players test their shapes. Both their mental and physical state that day and the improvement of their bodily strength and capabilities, or the diminishment of those capabilities after a break. The latter is true for the example above: the off-skates warm-up revealed that we were not in proper shape to play roller derby, not fully ready to enter the practice setting. The warm-up provides an entry which is characterized by the transitions from being walkers to becoming skaters.

B. Getting into gear, getting ready to skate

The confident reflections Karima offers at this chapter's opening on roller derby possibilities to re-experience subjectivities witness an off-track-on-track contrast: The track allows for behavior, signaling, and commentary unheard of outside the track. Before I explore the off-track/on-track contrast, I investigate the ways in which young women transit from their off-track selves to their on-track selves. To enter into the derby track, a player must transform her body by putting on gear. As discussed in Chapter Two, gear alters the body and should be thought of as part of the body. Bodily changes, in turn, allow for behavioral changes. These happen gradually from when players start putting on gear to when the in-gear warm-up is finished and players have *adjusted to the track* and moving on it as skaters.

Figure 3.1: Players putting on gear

> Finally, we reach the point where we can put on our skates. Alaa runs to the side to start changing. The rest of us walk there. I talk a bit with Nada Yemen. She broke her ankle in the spring while playing derby and is unsure of whether she will start again and risk another six weeks with her leg in a cast. Nahla and Arwa are not playing either but close friends of many team members and parts of the *derby family* in Beirut.
>
> As I change into my gear, I watch Karima who is already in her gear skating around the track. Admiring her speed and elegance, while tightening my kneepads, I cannot help but feeling jealous of her technique. She starts doing crossovers in a small circle, a technique to gain speed at the edges of the track, and she goes faster and faster. She is, by far, the best technical player we have, and I have come to worship her on and off the derby track. I tighten the laces in my skates and readjust my kneepads which are a little too big for me and often fall down when I fall. Nada Tunis, Wiem, Ola, and Afnan are all putting on gear as well. Nada Yemen is braiding Nada Tunis' hair. The two of them are chatting with Nahla, our PR manager. Nada Tunis snaps at Nada Yemen a couple of times when she is pulling her hair too hard. We all laugh at the interaction between the two as we finish up the adjustments of our gear.

We players change from sneakers into skates, from unprotected joints into pad covered knees, wrists, and elbows, and from soft heads only covered by hair or headscarves to the hard and seemingly unbreakable shells that derby helmets are. As we change into gear our bodies transform, in the literal sense with our feet getting extended

by skates and wheels and our joints and heads getting plastic covered; rock-hard; almost unbreakable.

The above-elaborated physical changes are standardized by WFTDA, who embeds protective gear in the rules for roller derby internationally. The rationale behind standardization of gear, as stated by the WFTDA, is safety (WFTDA Equipment n.d.). While safety matters cannot and should not be underestimated in high-intensity physical sports, I argue that much more than just safety is at stake when players put on gear. The transition from unprotected to protected bodies, from soft to hard body parts, and from walking to skating feet, also, mark a symbolic transition. As we change our bodies, we change our behavior and our expectations towards each other. In gear, we push each other; we compete against other players; and we tease each other to provoke competition. Violence and competition in many ways mark our interactions during practice, which stand in contrast to our behavior off the track, where violence and intense competition is censored and sublimated.

To use Turner's terminology, the change into gear is the separation stage. In this stage liminal personae signal the detachment from "an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a "state"), or from both" (Turner 1991[1969]:94). In the case of derby, the players make the change from the ways they perform their *gendered*, *aged*, and *social* identities outside the practice setting to the ways in which they perform these identities inside the practice setting. Changing is a stage in which we players are conscious about and reflecting upon the ways in which our bodies and behavior transform during derby practice. At times players will make comment such as: "I've needed this all week, I've been so busy," or "I have so much shit to do, but I need a break from all that." These comment respond positively to the

rupture derby practice imposes from the outside structures. With these comments derby feels like an escape from these structures. Players vocalize the uniqueness of derby in their lives during the stage in which we change into gear. I often find myself reflecting on what is about to happen during today's practice: What will I learn this practice? Will it be a good practice full of energy? Will I finally learn to do a trick that I have been struggling with? For me, there is an excitement to the transformation itself (that underlines the distinction I have made in Chapter Two between being and becoming). Getting ready, knowing that minutes from know I will be in skates and do tricks, compete, be pushed and push others: this all excites in itself. Nada Yemen told that while she changes she is both excited and overwhelmed with what is about to happen:

> [What goes through my mind while changing] first nothing. Because I am thinking that this is just soooo much and I'm like, earck okay, put this on, put this on. Then when I put it on and when I stand up I'm just like, oh damn! […] I'm just like: oh shit! And then I'm like, no, I'm gonna do this, it's gonna be fine... Sometimes, I watch Nada […] and I'm like, I wish I could reach that level. And sometimes I start thinking about what if today is the day where I finally get to be able to do the crossover, yeah…
>
> (Nada Yemen, interviewed by author, Beirut, August 2nd 2017)

Nada's reflections witness that the stages of changing into gear are stages where the players are between the well-known outside structures and the unpredictable structure of roller derby. Her conversation with herself— "Oh shit […] No, I'm gonna do this"— implies that she finds derby practice overwhelming. It also points to conflicting *selves*, to go back to Karima's statement from the beginning of this chapter. While derby allows for Karima to become *her true self,* Nada experiences conflicting "voices" in her head, debating the practice session before it has begun. Nada describe derby as the greatest challenge in her life: something she wants badly but also something that pushes her *outside her comfort zone* and overwhelms her. The conflicting emotions Nada has

about derby show themselves in intense ways in the changing stages, when the derby scene is urgent but not yet fully present.

1. Adjustments to track

> A loud thud draws my attention. I look up and see Alaa lying on the ground, laughing. The first fall of the day, and as usual it is Alaa who is fearless and willing to take the falls it takes to improve. I am ready and get up, now in full gear; helmet, elbow pads, wrist pads, kneepads, and skates. I am excited and nervous at the same time; I have not skated for a month and being on skates is unfamiliar yet again. I join Karima, Alaa, and Wiem on the track. One by one, the other players join us as they are done with putting on the gear. Hadeel arrives, change, and join us as well. For a while, we free-skate, which involves circling the track using the techniques or tricks we feel like. We skate around the track, sometimes passing each other. Some squat on the skates; others sticky skate (skating without lifting their feet); still others have gone to the middle of the court to practice turning on the skates. The sound of skates on the painted concrete surface of the court mixes with laughter, curses, and shout-outs when someone makes a move well. Players also give each other advice on how to improve their moves, postures, and skating skills. Occasionally, the sound of the pads hitting the ground when someone falls echoes—*Plack, plack*—and mixes with other sounds.

The transitions from being walkers to being skaters happen gradually. In contrast to the transitional stage that marks the changes into gear, the stage where we adjust to the track is more fluid. Some players only need a few laps around the track to adjust, others need more time. For five-ten minutes everyone is doing her own thing. Different players use different strategies. Alaa, for example, goes full speed almost immediately and take the falls she needs to take to adjust to moving on skates. I take a different approach:

> I always start out slow, adjusting to the skates and the ground; sometimes the court is dusty and slippery; sometimes clean. Today it is clean. Nada Tunis commented that it looked clean when we arrived, now I can slowly feel it; my skates are in my control, not sliding to the side due to dust. I slowly relearn to move on skates. At first, I skate forward, taking strides. Then I sticky skate for a bit. I circle my arms and squat a few times. My muscles are warm; my heart is pumping. Not full speed as in the middle of a scrimmage, but enough that I

> notice it. After a few more rounds of normal skating, I start doing crossovers at the edges, lifting my right foot and crossing it over my left, and gaining more speed. I do crossovers slow speed at first, trying to avoid repeating Alaa's fall. Gradually, the movements begin to feel familiar, and I do them at higher speed.

Adjustments on the track are adjustments to bodies that are qualitatively different from bodies outside the track. Slowly we players re-learn how to move on wheels and to use the possibilities provided by wheels and plastic covered pads. We learn to use the space the track consists of, using the edged to gain speed (crossovers), and moving through the elliptical track. This re-learning process differs depending on how experienced a player is and on the day. Some days I readjust to being a skater within minutes; other days I need more time. It depends on my mental state, how long it has been since I last skated, and my physical shape. The gradual adjustment is key to the quality of a practice. We become braver and more willing to try out new moves when we feel familiar in skates and gear.

When a young woman transitions from being a walker to a skater, much more than movements change. Players do not coincide with their selves outside the track when they are playing derby; violence and fierce competition mark their on-track personas. Speed and elegance mark our movements and bodies. We *feel* like we are flying through the track. We feel together, as a community on the track. Our transitions into skaters enable the feelings, movements, and characteristics that mark our derby selves.

C. Techniques, transformations, and togetherness

After the off-skate warm-up and the individual adjustments to the track, the actual practice, which involves group interactions, begins. We start with technical

training, often skating skills. Then we move to practicing elements of the game, blocking and jamming techniques. The technical training provides players with space to teach each other, have fun, and build relations. As players change over time, improve, and develop personal styles, their bonds to each other change as well, often strengthen.

1. Learning to fall

> Karima blows the whistle, and we all gather around her. "Let's do the falling exercise," she says. I have ambiguous feelings about this exercise; on the one hand, it is an essential skill to fall correctly, and it is necessary to practice. On the other hand, I feel slight anxiety.
>
> We all line up at the end of the court, Karima blows the whistle, and we start skating forward. By the sound of the whistle again, I throw myself down, while flexing my core muscles, hitting the floor with my knee(pad)s first, then my wrist(pad)s. Already I am lifting my right leg, putting the right skate on the ground as I push off the ground with my wrist pads, lifting my left leg up, twisting my upper body slightly to towards my right and bending in my knees and my hips, as I lift my right skate to start skating. Immediately the sound of the whistle is back, and I throw myself yet again. Every time I throw myself to the ground, the sound of my knee and wrist pads hitting the ground mixes with sounds of other players' pads hitting the ground. Plastic hitting concrete, *plack, plack*, loud and echoing in the semi-covered arena where we practice. I fall three times before I reach the end of the court, turn around ready to go the other way next. We arrive more or less simultaneously. We turn and start over, redoing the exercise a couple of times. Karima then tells us to focus on falling and getting up in less than five seconds, which is considered a minimum skill in roller derby. She counts between the times she blows the whistle.

As noted in Chapter Two, falling is an essential derby skill. That is, falling in ways which do not harm ourselves or other players. A skilled derby player can fall and get back up within seconds. Throughout the time I have practiced with Beiruthless, practice-falling has been a repetitive exercise. I never reached a point where I was completely comfortable falling on command. I prefer the spontaneous falls, not making a conscious decision. Maybe this is because it still seems counterintuitive to throw myself to the ground, as opposed when someone pushes me during a game situation and

falling merely happens; when I do not have to make a conscious decision to throw myself to the ground. Or maybe because my anxiety stems from the time pressure and another fear: the fear of being the weakest link on the team and others knowing. When we do it all together—when we fall and get up in a line while skating forwards—it becomes clear which players are slow and which individuals are relatively fast in getting up. Still, this exercise was essential for my progress when I first started, as it helped me overcome the fear of falling and gaining confidence as a skater. As for the fear of not being good, no one has ever compared players while doing this exercise, and while I admire the players who do it well, I would not be able to name the players who struggle with it. While I experience falling exercises as hectic, marked by loud sounds and the feeling of being in a rush, I am thankful to Nada Tunis, who told me one of the first times I practiced, that I need to fall on command and stood still staring at me until I threw myself to the ground. Players pressure each other *outside comfort zones* because this helps other players improve and build trust in oneself as well as other players. Teaching other players and learning from other players are essential components to being part of Beiruthless.

2. Teaching and learning together

Figure 3.2: Karima doing a crossover

> Next, we practice crossovers. We skate around the track, most of us just doing crossovers at the edges, Karima and Alaa doing them several times on the straight parts of the track as well, gaining more and more speed. We give each other advice while playing; *"Camilla, bend your knees more,"* and, *"Afnan, hold the position longer."* Some take small water breaks once in a while. Practicing crossovers is one of the more exhausting drills, as we skate non stop and, for the most part, relatively fast.

Derby players use crossovers to turn at the corners on the field; it helps keep speed while skating in a curve. Instead of skating and leaning into a new direction gradually, which requires space and slows a player down, the player will lift the foot that is towards the outside of the field from the ground, cross it over the other foot, and then lift the second foot up to place it in front (see Figure 3.2). She thus transfers her body weight to the foot in front and increases speed instead of diminishing it. When players do crossovers, they use their strength in their legs to accelerate. Crossovers is one of the many derby skills that a player will continue to work on regardless of how experienced she is; a crossover is never fully perfected; a player can always improve the ways in which she gains speed around the edges of the track. At the same time, it is an essential skill to have as speed is necessary to win a scrimmage, especially for a jammer. Therefore, crossover is the technique that we have focused the most on perfecting. We often correct each other in order to help each other improve individually and to improve as a team.

> I ask Karima, how I can teach myself to do more crossovers around the track and get more comfortable with gaining a lot of speed. She instructs me to do crossovers in a small circle in the middle of the court. Afnan joins me, and we take turns moving around in small circles, only doing crossovers, correcting each other.

Getting advice from other players is comforting during the technical training. It is a reminder that skating skills are required over time and not something you either have or you do not. So is partnering up with other players and correcting each other. Afnan is often my partner in the technical part of practice. She started a semester before me but took half a semester's break, and we are on the same level in many techniques. While we have not talked much about this, I feel comfortable working with her and sense that it is mutual. We share the struggle of having started later than most of the other players and still have not perfected a lot of the basic skills.

> Afnan goes first while I watch her from the side. She manages to do four crossovers per round in the small circle, and I cheer. She gains more and more speed for every crossing she makes in the small circle while still holding her body stable. What an accomplishment! My turn. I take a few strides while entering the circle. My heart is already pumping fast, as I concentrate on bending my knees, keeping them flexible, and leaning my upper body forward to get the perfect derby position. I start doing crossovers, with less than a second between them; lifting my right foot, crossing it over my left, lifting my left foot, and putting it down next to my right, then lifting my right foot again, crossing it over my left. Repeating the moves again and again. It's a rush as I go faster and faster. A rush that is both full of joy and fear; I am not fully in control; I would not be able to make a sudden stop if I had to. "One, two, three…," I count the number of crossovers I do out loud every lap to push myself to do them without long intervals between them. I get to three and a half before I stop doing the moves and break when I have lost some speed. "I freaked out," I tell Afnan while catching my breath. "Maybe you should try with a bigger circle then?" she suggests, laughing a bit at the gesture I make to show my frustration: I am looking up, eyes wide open, grinding my teeth, and with my hands up in front of me fingers bend as if I was strangling something in front of me. "Fuck it," I yell while laughing as I skate back to the track and do crossovers around the track with the rest. Afnan takes another round in the middle of the court.

Personal victories, whether learning a new skill, like Afnan's new speed in crossing-over, or perfecting an old one, are among the things I love most about practicing with the team. Genuinely sharing pride and joy in our accomplishments is key to a team sport

which both demands technical excellence and courage. Afnan's accomplishments above became mine as I had corrected her earlier that practice. When I gave up on doing more crossovers, while annoying and frustrating, my defeat turned into a fun moment between me and Afnan—joking about the frustration. Nada Yemen described derby as "a space for us to have fun. [A space] to teach each other," when I interviewed her at the beginning of my fieldwork. Then, I found it odd that she paired having fun and teaching each other. Now, learning from and teaching other players is one of the things I have come to enjoy. When a player learns from other players and passes on that knowledge, it builds bonds; it enforces team spirit. In Victor Turner's terminology, this is part of the *communitas* of derby practice.

Communitas refers to the cohesion—the comradeship and homogeneity—felt by a group of individuals sharing experiences outside ordinary structures of society (Turner 1991[1969]:96). The comradeship between derby players, or team spirit to use a sports term, runs through the whole practice session. I do feel it more intensely, a togetherness with other players, in the second half of practice where we practice technical skills and correct each other, blocking and jamming strategies in pairs or groups, and practice-scrimmage. *Communitas* is "a moment in and out of time" (Turner 1991[1969]:96), meaning that the intense feelings of comradeship and cohesion suspend linear time and stand out as an exceptions moment in linear time at the same time. Or in other words; *communitas* presents itself in the now, it is "of the now" (Turner 1991[1969]:113); of intensified moments. The intensity of *communitas* allows for players to strengthen their relationships with each other. In several of my interviews, players referred to derby practice as a unique thing in their lives which they share with close friends. While some team members were close friends before they started playing

derby, others have built their relationship through derby practice. For me, the ethnographer who did not know any other players well before starting roller derby, I have built close friendships with women with whom I would not have interacted if not for the sport.

Communitas is that which allows for group-generated sensations. One is feeling equal to other players. A second is sharing a *special bond*, a term often used by team members. A third is trusting each other which allows us to experiment with ways of being and ultimately with our subjectivities. The team's openness to experimentation with subjectivities, acceptance of each other regardless of differences, and our flat structure; no one is above anyone in derby practice, enable players to become their *true selves*, in Karima's words (see quote at the beginning of this chapter). Roller derby is by the players, for the players (this will be discussed further later in this chapter).

C*ommunitas* give liminal personaes the potentialty for subjective changes. As Turner points out, *communitas* and liminality happen in the subjunctive mode (Turner 1991[1969]:127; Turner 1987[1988]:103), meaning that *communitas* and liminality are stages where individuals and groups reflect upon what is possible: Who can I become? Roller derby allows for these reflections, for players to rethink who they are and who they can become. While the technical trainings allow for these reflections, they are perhaps better exemplified by practice-games and scrimmages.

D. Games and competition

During derby practice, we often play several games. We sometimes play *Queen of the track* after the free-skating interval at the beginning of practice. This is an all-against-all-game where players skate and push each other until only one player is left

standing. This game engulfs players with laughter and joy, as it is chaotic and unpredictable. During game time players are in close physical contact with each other. While violent in our pushes and attempts to trick each other, close physical contact gets us *back in the derby mode,* where we dare and expect to be physical and violent towards each other.

Other warm-up games include *tail catching*, where each player attaches plastic strips to her body, and we compete to steal as many tails from other players as possible. There is also *wheel throwing*, a game where two teams play against each other and use a wheel as a ball. The team who has the most passes of the wheel between them at the end wins. All of these warm-up games mock elements of a roller derby game. At the end of practice, we play roller derby. A practice-scrimmage takes place in the following way:

Figure 3.3: A jammer hits the pack of blockers

> While flexing my thighs, my upper arms, and my core, I look to my left. Karima is ready: bent knees, her left arm bent in front of her chest, her right hand pushing up against Nada's to get balance. I look to my right, Weim is ready in the same position as Karima's but reversed. She leans against Nada with her right hand. Nada stands facing us. She is the *Mamma*; communicating to the rest of us, supporting us when we are about to fall, letting the other

> players push up against her to keep balance, and thus making sure the jammer will not pass us. I can feel my heart pumping and the sweat running down my forehead. It's a thrill. Being calm before the storm, we, the blockers, wait in excitement. Tense, ready, we will let no one pass us. Not even Alaa, who is jamming, and who gains speed fast and always gives the blockers a hard push with her chest. We hear the whistle, immediately followed by the sound of skates on the plastic paint covered track. As the sound of the skates gets nearer, Nada starts yelling directions. "She's coming on the inside, inside." In a split second, Karima and I move closer to each other, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, just before it hits us: A hard push directed to my left shoulder and Karima's right, pushing us forward. My body twists, its left side forward, but its right, still steady. Pressing back, Karima and I manage to regain a stable position with the help of Nada in front of us, whose shoulder we are pushing up against with our hands. Now it is force against force; Karima and I, with the support of Nada in front of us and Wiem guiding my right side, merge against the force from behind, aimed at breaking through the wall we form with our bodies. I push up against Nada's shoulder with my right hand to keep my balance, feeling my muscles burning as we—Karima, Nada, Wiem, and I—fight against the force forming behind. Suddenly the force behind us redirects. Nada yells, "Outside!" I feel the push on my right shoulder. This time it is not one stable push but several, like an axe hitting our shoulders and forcing them more and more apart with every hit. This time Alaa is not pushing with her chest but her shoulder. We are at a disadvantage: Weim and I are not close enough to keep the force behind us. Alaa breaks through us, moving between us. *Dammit, I'm not losing this scrimmage*. I push her with my hips, forcing a slight misbalance but not enough to get her off the track or prevent her from passing my full body. I am now behind Alaa, not allowed to push her anymore. Nada pushes Alaa with her chest, which keeps her from getting past our last blocker for a few seconds only. "Form again, she's coming back!" Nada yells as Alaa skates around the track, fast and victorious.

We always end practice with a scrimmage. Depending on the number of players we are, we either practice with two full teams, or we practice with one jammer and four blockers. The above description is from the perspective of a blocker, the position that the majority of the players (four out of five) take during a game. The blockers rely heavily on each other: in the example above, Karima and I would not have been able to block Alaa's path at first if Nada had not supported us—physically by allowing us to push against her shoulders and mentally by giving us directions and by this showing that she is ahead of Alaa, if Alaa should change her course. We trust, have to trust, that Nada is guiding us, as she has the overview of Alaa's movements. When she

communicates Alaa's movements to us, *inside*, *outside*, we respond without questioning. We have played together countless times, and much of our interactions between the blockers are automatized: Karima and I moved our shoulders together per reflex when Nada screamed "inside."

The event described above, while overflowing with sensations and interactions, took about twenty seconds. I only know this from checking a recording after practice. During practice I have no idea about the length of a struggle between a jammer and the blockers. Again, time on the derby track is not linear but rather marked by movements and interactions. Neither is space measurable but rather defined by the space we move through and take up with our bodies. Learning to take up space is an essential component to roller derby; to block someone's way physically with my body is not something I often do outside practice, quite the opposite. As a young woman, I often, unconsciously, give others (especially males) space when I am in public. I know from conversations with my fellow players that they share this norm. This off-track norm I will discuss later in this chapter. That we take up space on the track, in the anti-structure that is derby practice, indicates that the practice-setting allow us to transgress norms and to experiment with our *aged*, *gendered*, and *social* selves. As pointed out by Turner, liminal personas are stripped of statuses that characterize outside structures (Turner 1987[1988]:107). While derby players are not un-gendered per se on the track, derby practice structures other ways for us to interact as women. Violence, close physical contact, competitiveness, and joking relations unheard in public spaces flow from and through us. The structure of practice allows us to experiment with subjectivities, including age, gender, and sexuality within the derby group.

E. Kinship and partnership

> We became each other's family: we live together, whenever I have an issue, I just turn to my friends here, before I call my parents or anything.
>
> (Nada Tunis, interviewed by author, Beirut, May 22nd 2017)

> […] relatives emotionally and symbolically live each other's life and die each other's deaths.
>
> (Sahlins 2013:ix)

Figure 3.4: Facebook post: "Beirut Summer 2017.. It was a good one #Family"

The discussion of *communitas* in the preceding section leads to a common way of vocalizing the close ties amongst Beiruti roller derby players: "The team is family to me," Nada Yemen said during an interview. At another point, she called Nada Tunis her "Derby Mamma." Other players use similar expressions: "our little derby family," "my life partners," "our sisterhood," and the like. Alaa posted a picture of some team players

on Facebook and Instagram during the Summer 2017 with the hashtag "Family," a way of communicating both to the team and to outsiders that this how close the team is. Karima described derby as, "this intimate thing that I do with my friends. You know. It's being with my friends, having fun, making memories." For the players, derby is not something you do with just anyone; it is *intimate*, something you do with people to whom you have close emotional connections, people we, the players, call, "family."

All players live away from their families, most live together in the dorms at the American University of Beirut. We see each other at practice, go to the gym together, and *hang out* several times during the week outside the practice settings. We share derby-based sensations, something unique that has brought of close together; the *communitas* of the liminal zones that constitute derby practice is shared solely within this group. We share each other's pains, joys, toughness, and liberty on and off the track. We rely on each other in multiple ways: When a player is injured, the team will take care of many of her daily tasks, buy groceries, help her shower, change clothes, go with her to the hospital, and help her get to and from classes, for example. While the kinship of the Beiruti derby players sounds harmonious, the close relations to other players can, at times, be emotionally draining for us. Nada Tunis pointed to the responsibility she feels towards other players, for their wellbeing more than her own. The responsibility she feels towards other players, to help them "in the right ways", as she said, can be a huge weight on her shoulders. Likewise, interplayer conflicts over minor issues (I have not experienced anything major), easily become emotional and intense, not just for the players involved, but for the whole team. All of this is part of "living each other's lives" (Sahlins 2013:ix), for good or for worse. Not just partaking in, but *living* each other's lives refer to sharing ups and down, interfering in each other's

existences, and “knowing each other as we know ourselves”, as a player described the derby family.

The emotional and symbolical connections that players form are, thus, both on and off the track. One cannot be thought of without the other: We trust each other outside the track because of the close bonds we form and the track, we are able to be intimate on the track because we know each other in multiple ways both from derby and outside derby. Derby is that which bring us closer together outside the track. Many players would not have started derby if they had not known other players. Outside and inside feed forward and back into each other and make us a family whether we are playing derby, having dinner or parties together, or merely hanging out a Sunday morning on my balcony or in Karima and Nahla’s room in the dorms. Marshall Sahlins defines kinship the following way: “The specific quality of kinship, I argue, is “mutuality of being”: kinsfolk are persons who participate intrinsically in each other’s existence; they are members of one another” (Sahlins 2013:ix). Following this definition, Beiruthless is a family: we are each other’s kin. Roller derby structures engulf players with feelings of being close to other players for multiple reasons: The sensations that players share (See Chapter Two) and the ways in which roller derby is *by the players, for the players*.

1. By the players, for the players

Figure 3.5: Karima adjusting the wheels of another player

Roller derby is a sport that is *by the players, for the players* (WFTDA Mission Statement n.d.). This implies that everything related to the sport is arranged by players, including renting fields, arranging tournaments, getting funding for new gear, and all internal as well as external communication. This both gives players an influence over the team or club for whom they play but also requires players to get involved with the team and help each other with practicalities to make practice and games possible. It also involves helping and teaching other players how to deal with their gear (see Figure 3.5), learning new techniques, and handling injuries. Beiruthless, a relatively new team, does not play in any league. Our practice sessions are arranged by Karima, Nada Tunis, and Alaa mainly, but other players assist at times. Nada Tunis takes care of renting the basketball court. Nahla is responsible for all PR, which includes contact with journalist and all social media communication. The rest of players help take care of gear, set up the track, and whatever might come up. As Nada Tunis said: "We created this together." We players created and continue to create the setting that allows for us to play roller derby. This togetherness contrasts to the ways in which most sports club work in

Lebanon (soccer and basketball, e.g.). Most clubs are administered by paid staff and players pay fees to play games and practice[7]. In return, players can focus on the sport and do not have to get involved with anything but the actual game. Arranging everything together foster *communitas* as well: Players have created and continue to create the structures that allow for them to play derby, they share both experience and the responsibility of making derby experiences possible. Together they create the structures that allow for them to rediscover their subjectivity ("become their true selves," in Karima's words), and this engulf players with communal feelings as they feel responsible towards each other, take pride in their communal accomplishments, and trust that they can rely on each other when they need to.

2. Jokes and name-calling

Another factor that fosters and is fostered by *communitas* is the ways in which players joke on the field. We joke, even sexually, about each other's violence in ways unheard of outside the liminal zones of derby. Karima at times calls Alaa a monster or a predator on the track, referring to her strength and fearlessness, for example. Furthermore, most players have derby names: Names given by their teammates describing their on-track personalities. Amongst the derby names of the team are Karima Garima (Karima crime), Galadiator (Gladiator and Alaa combined), Killer Piller, and Resting Kick-Face. These names refer to violent behavior and toughness. This is not something female names or nicknames outside the track often symbolize. Knowing the derby names of other players and at times referring to them by their derby

[7] Several studies have been conducted on the organization of sports clubs in Lebanon (cf. Reiche 2011; Al-Masri 2016)

name gives players the sense of sharing something exclusive. Only we know each other's derby names, get their meaning, and call each other by those names.

a. "Ya mouzza" and "Check out that ass"

Joking amongst Beiruti players include sexual jokes. Some are ironic, mocking common catcalling terms, such as "Ya, Mouzza [Hey sweetie or Hey sexy lady]." These terms are both used in private messages (text or social media), when we are going out and someone looks particularly nice that day, and as jokes mocking harassment. The latter can happen spontaneously or when we talk about harassment. These terms, while uncomfortable when coming from strangers, function as a way of joking with female struggles and acknowledge our shared public experiences of harassment. In a way, they negate harassment: there is a power to mocking harassers, showing each other and ourselves that we are not broken by harassing comments.

Other jokes include references to other player's physical appearances, especially body parts that are often sexualized. "Check out that ass," or "She is protected by her bootie" (when a player falls but does not get injured). Sexual jokes, also including *that's what she said jokes* and mocking sexual positions during practice, are *homosocial* ways of expressing sexuality, something which young women do not do in public. *Homosocial* is a term used to describe social bonds between persons of the same sex. It is "a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with "homosexual," and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from "homosexual"" (Sedgwick 1985:1). I use homosocial here to refer to the close bonds between players that allow for us to use sexual jokes and to express sexuality without these jokes expressing the desire of a specific sexual object.

F. Derby outside practice

After the ritual's completion (in Turner's terminology, the reintegration phase), subjects go back to their everyday life, changed by the ritual (Turner 1991[1969]:94). Because of the changes engendered by on-the-track sensations, derby practices, impact outside worlds we players inhabit. In the following sections, I investigate the presence of the track *outside the track*, the becoming of new selves, and the ways in which outside structures affect derby practice and are affected by derby.

1. After practice hangout

> Fifteen minutes after practice ended, we are de-geared, sweaty, and tired. My knee-, elbow-, and wristpads all smelled when I took them off. I need to wash them soon again. My hair is wet from sweat, as it has been under the helmet. We all walk out together, talking on the way, about when we will go to the gym this week, about upcoming assignments for university, and today's practice. We go to a juice bar across from the school after practice. Here we sit for around half an hour, talking, while we get juices or food, and relaxing before we take a service back to Hamra, where most of us live.

The after-practice hangout at a juice bar is, for me, an extension of practice. Often, on a Sunday night, I have to work on assignments, write field notes, or in other ways prepare for the coming week. Staying with the other derby players for another half an hour postpones everyday life, obligations, and dull tasks. Other players often complain that they have to get back to studying for an exam, do laundry, or get some sleep before tomorrow's classes. Procrastinating a bit while having juice and chatting postpones our full reintegration into outside structures. While we are not pushing or competing against each other anymore, the jokes from derby practice continue and we are still more or less in our own isolated group. While we are in public, we are together and not fully subjected to expectations we normally experience outside derby practice.

2. Public spaces

> You underestimated yourself before… But when you play derby you see you self improve and learn that you could actually punch a guy.
> (Ola, interviewed by author, Beirut, August 10th 2017)

Amongst team members, we often talk about our experiences of being young women, both in Lebanon and in the countries where we grew up or lived previously. We share many experiences of sexual harassment in public spaces: being catcalled, grabbed, and stared at. We talk about specific incidents and the discomfort of being in public spaces at times. As Nahla described it; "I'm always on the lookout, always judging my environment." This constant lookout stems from previous experiences, some even dating back to our childhood years, and the emphasis from parents, teachers, and other's that a girl should always *be careful when she is out*. In contrast to our experiences on the derby track, we are hyper-aware of our gender when we are in public spaces. Farha Ghannam's combination of Bourdieu's term *bodily hexis*, the expressions of a subject's embodied *habitus*[8], and Victor Turner's term *liminality* in theorizing about urban mobilities in Cairo applies to our experiences. Ghannam argues:

> From the time that individuals leave the front door to the moment they return home and reunite with their families, they are operating in the liminal state of mobility. Attendant with that condition is the opportunity to have experiences and encounters that may transform their identities, realign social hierarchies, or reinforce power inequalities (Ghannam 2011:790-1).

The team members of Beiruthless share embodied knowledge of being young women. We have learned from early ages that we are at risk, emotionally and physically. The

[8] Pierre Bourdieu defines habitus as an individual interpretation of the surrounding structure and an internalisation of this structure. Habitus is a system of dispositions that individuals develop in response to the surrounding structures (Bourdieu 1977 [1972]:15)

countless lessons we have gotten from moving in public are questioned and at times countered through derby-based sensations of toughness and strength:

> I am sitting at café DePrague in Hamra with Nada Tunis and Nahla, talking about harassment. Nada and Nahla tell me about the impact derby has had on their ways of dealing with harassment. Nahla tells the following anecdote: "There was this really creepy guy, who was staring at Nada's boobs and he was approaching us. We were sitting next to Younis [café]. We were just having a cigarette discussing how overwhelmed she [Nada] is and all of that. And then, that guy, when he approached us, I was like, I freaked out, 'cause it brought me back to shitty times. At that moment I discovered that I am traumatized basically. […] Anyways, he was trying to communicate with us, talk to us, he was pretending he couldn't talk or something, he was so weird. He was this old man. I freaked out and I told Nada, and she was like: "What can he do to us, I can literally beat the shit out of him." For me that's not a basic thing, it's something I haven't thought about. Being strong, it can actually extend outside of our circle." Nada interrupts and says: "If I can play derby, I can beat up an old man. For me, being strong is showing off and standing up for the girls. You don't have to use it [your strength], but it just makes you feel good."

In this incident, the important factor is not Nada's ability to pummel a guy. Rather, it is her *feeling* of emotional and physical strength that overpower her fear. What I am pointing to here, is how affects get incorporated as a sensation, the feeling of toughness, during the practice structure into Nada's body and gains meaning in interactions outside the track as realizations of her own transformation.

That day, we talked for a long time about harassment and how afraid we have felt in the past when someone approached us in a harassing manner. Nahla told about how she used to circle around groups of guys when she was walking by them instead of through the group, which would have been faster and made more sense. This led to a discussion of taking up space in public. We talked about taking public transportation and trying to sit as far from strangers as possible, taking up the minimal amount of space. In contrast, we all agreed that most men sit with their legs spread and take up a great deal of space. Public spaces are in many ways the radical opposite of derby in relation to the ways in which we use space: during derby practice, we attempt to take up

space, we demand space to make jumps, crossovers, and skate fast around the track. We sense that we are free to take the space that we need, that we own this space here and now. These experiences counter the ways in which we normally seek to not take up space and transform the ways in which we use space outside derby.

a. Gym and corniche

Before team members started to go to the gym together, many players found it uncomfortable to go to the gym. The weightlifting areas in gyms are often dominated by men, and it is, at times, a struggle to take space there as a woman and to demand one's right to use the bars, plates, and dumbbells. Going together however, in a group where we identify as *badass* and *tough*, we take up space provocatively. If someone tries to take one of the weights we are using or comments on the amount of weight we lift (e.g. suggesting that he gets us a lighter dumbbell), one of us will give him a sassy comeback, such as an ironic comment that embarrasses him: "Yeah, Alaa, you're a woman, shouldn't you pretend that you're weak?" We demonstratively line up and sometimes lift in sync, symbolizing that we know how to lift as a group and that we can take up as much space as anyone else.

Going to the gym is of great symbolic importance to many players. This is a space where we get to act out our strength and toughness outside derby practice—where we show ourselves and others that our toughness extends beyond derby time-spaces. Skating on the corniche in Beirut has a similar symbolic effect: When skating in public, we show that we are the ones who *do not give a fuck* about what other's think is appropriate (see Chapter Two for description of public skating). Taking up space outside derby practice is thus connected to the sensations we experience in the liminal

zones that is derby practice and the ways in which derby practice allow us to rethink our subjectivities as an important extension of derby practice where we symbolically manifest the characteristics we desire to possess.

3. Hangouts, dinners, and parties

Even when we are not practicing, because of the *communitas* of derby, the group itself, when we are together isolated from others, forms a liminal zone. Our team parties, hangouts, and derby meals are marked by many of the same jokes and the same *homosocial* behavior as we share on the track. We know from roller derby that in this group, we can behave in ways we normally do not and that would not be appreciated outside this group. We have private parties where we dance, some drink alcohol, and chat and joke with each other at our private homes. Here, we are in many ways free to act as silly and normatively unfeminine as we like. We are also free to dance in sexual ways we do not dance when at clubs or bigger parties.

Our hangouts include various social situations, from intimate conversations in a player's bedroom about dating lives, problems at hand, or harassment and discrimination that a teammate is experiencing, to coffee breaks between study sessions where we complain and joke about our professional lives. These outside-practice interactions, while calmer and less organized than practice, are often marked by derby discussions including how to improve as a team, anecdotes from practice, insider jokes from practice, and sore muscles or bruises. Sometimes we watch derby clips on Youtube, which we use as inspiration for our practice. And sometimes we talk about other derby teams and leagues and our hopes of improving as a team and that

Beiruthless one day will play in a league. Roller derby is almost always present in our off-track interactions, as we discuss derby and refer to the track.

G. Communitas and sharing historical consciousness

Beiruthless players share much more than roller derby. The team is in many ways a homogeneous group: we are all women in our 20s living in Beirut. Most players are Arabs but not Lebanese nationals. Most players are studying for their undergraduate degree on scholarships. As discussed earlier in this chapter, we share many experiences as young women. The Arab women on the team (all but two players) share experiences of being *young, Arab women* at a particular point in history: they share experiences of facing suspicion when they travel to the Global North, of narratives about Arab women as suppressed in international media, and of growing up in a region where foreign intervention, oppressive powers, and civil wars have affected neighboring countries and for some players their home countries. They further share memories of the excitements during the 2011 uprisings and the frustrations that followed the aftermath. The players have told me stories of being proud of their Arabic heritage on the one hand and concerned with current socio-political situations in the region on the other. At the same time, as scholarship students at a prestigious university, many players express that they struggle to feel like they belong at this university as they do not share class markers with most fellow students (most players are from a middle-class background), including but not limited to the access to material goods, acquired language skills, and the prospect of future opportunities. On the other hand, the group is aware that within Lebanon they are relatively privileged: their scholarship covers education, housing, and healthcare. The group further shares political views: they have all sought out a liberal

arts education and share an interest in liberal freedom rights and a social consciousness based on either personal socioeconomic struggles or on seeing the struggles in their neighborhoods as they grew up.

All of the foregoing unites the group on the one hand, but also makes it a hard group to enter. The team at times discusses whether it is hard for newcomers to the team who do not share the same privileges (education and access to health care) or socioeconomic background, to enter the team. Also, the close relations between veteran players on the team make a hard group to penetrate as insider jokes and intimate knowledge of other player's lives are not shared with people who are not already part of the group. This is an obstacle to getting newcomers integrated into the team but also, I argue, the very foundation for the ways in which players are enabled to rethink their subjectivities in altered structures: players allow themselves to experiment with behaviors and to rearrange their relationship to sensations on the derby track because they feel safe doing so in this group—Players are engulfed with *communitas* during derby practice because they dare to enter into the liminal zones of derby practice without apprehensions. They already share experiences, of the positive and negative kind, and share a desire to rearrange their relationship to sensations based on these experiences.

We can develop this further to argue that the players share what Lauren Berlant calls *historical consciousness*: a sense of the historical present and affective responses to this present (Berlant 2011:3-4,7-8). Berlant argues that "affective atmospheres are shared, not solitary, and that bodies are continuously busy judging their environments and responding to the atmospheres in which they find themselves" (Berlant 2011:15). The Beiruti derby players are navigating pride in their heritage despite the

stigmatization of the societies in which they grew up in international media and politics on the one hand and a critical approach to sociocultural, political, and economic issues on the other. As the players grew up in times (the 90s and 00s) when the Arab-Islamic world was a highly debated region internationally, both with reference to culture, politics, and religion (which it still is), the players often feel politicized as Arab women. As a team, players experience it as devastating when journalists from the Global North write about Beiruthless within the framework of their being Arab women (see Chapter Four for a discussion of outsider publics that interfere with the derby setting). The devastation stems from the ways in which outside interventions that enforce outside structures break with the ways players get to rethink their subjectivities through social and material interactions that rearrange their relationships to sensations on the derby track.

Shared historical consciousness amongst the players is engendering communitas on the field: While everyone has their own, individual struggles, players recognize themselves in each other. "Essentially, *communitas* is a relationship between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals," Turner argued (Turner 1991[1969]:131). Players take pride in each other for playing derby and for engaging in a setting where identity matters are questioned and where experience transform individuals in, at times, radical ways:

> I'm really proud of each and every girl we have on the team. Cause everyone has their own challenges when it comes to the game. Just, you know, you just watch your friends get over these things, and it makes you feel proud, yeah… I am proud of a really badass group.
>
> (Nada Yemen, Interviewed by author, Beirut, August 2nd 2017)

Nada's expression of the pride she takes in seeing her friends overcome challenges in the game witness how she feels connected closely to them as individuals and of being

part of a group of young women that engage in experimental ways of being in and sensing the world. Going back to Karima's comment "Roller Derby allows me to be my true self," I argue that becoming one's true self on the track is possible because we, the players, are surrounded by other women with whom we share experiences. This include experiences from outside the track as well as from derby practice. Because of shared experiences, we expect each other's respect and acceptance and therefore, we behave in new ways and experiment with social and material elements in new ways to rediscover our subjectivities; who we can become. In other words, roller derby coordinates sensations into other subjectivities, by bringing people together around practice and scrimmage, and by rearranging their relationships to the sensations. These experiences are ultimately transformative, which manifests itself by the ways in which derby players seek to take up space in public in similar ways to how they take up space on the track. To conclude this thesis, I explore what happens when derby players are confronted with outside publics in derby-settings, how they interact with and communicate to outside publics as a team, as well as how the players relate to the international derby scene.

CHAPTER IV

PUBLICS

> They [journalists] are dealing with us internationally as the bunch of women, Middle Eastern, brown women who are suffering and trying to liberate themselves from the confines of the society. And it was really surprising for us because we have never perceived of ourselves like that. […] I want to make people more familiar with the individuals themselves, with the players […] You know, to familiarize their existence. They are not just a bunch of brown women, no!
>
> (Nahla, PR-manager of Beiruthless, interviewed by author, Beirut, June 21st 2017)

Beiruthless receives much attention from different media outlets, international as well as local. Short documentaries, TV-pieces, podcasts, and online as well as printed articles have featured the team. While roller derby teams in general garner much media attention worldwide, the scale of Beiruthless' coverage exceeds the scale most teams reach. At the same time, coverage of Beirutless differs from that of other teams in one important aspect: It focuses on their Muslim-Arab background. In general, pieces about the team produced by international media outlets adopt one of two main narratives, either representing the team as a group of women fighting against oppressive structures—patriarchy and misogyny—or as a group of war victims engaging in roller derby as a form of escapism from trauma. Yet, as noted by Nahla in the quote above, players do not recognize themselves in these representations.

In the beginning, when journalists started contacting Beiruthless at the end of 2015, the players felt overwhelmed with the attention. Soon, the players discovered the difficulty of controlling the narratives journalists produce about them. They decided to appoint a PR-manager, Nahla, to take charge of contact with journalists and of

producing material for the team's Facebook page, i.e. the external communication controlled by the team itself. Dealing with journalists has proven to be a difficult task for players, not only emotionally but also practically. Journalists demand time; some interrupt practice to interview players and demand players do specific tricks, repeat falls, or play in specific ways. They want to get the "perfect pictures" or footage for their pieces. They can prevent the team from practicing when allowed onto the track in these ways. Emotionally, journalists can force us to accept that even though we attempt to make our motivations for playing derby clear to them, they might still write from an unexpected angle or focus on Muslim-Arab signifiers in their descriptions of the team (headscarves, e.g.).

Stereotypical representations sadden players, as they stand in sharp contrast to how players perceive of themselves and contradicts the ways in which they re-experience selves while playing derby. Roller derby allows players to rethink their subjectivities in liminal zones by rearranging their relationship to sensations, time, and space (see Chapters Two and Three), but when journalists write pieces that focus on gender and ethnicity in normative and often stereotypical ways, they interrupt our joy of partaking in this sport. This leads to frustrations and feelings of powerlessness. In this chapter, I explore the stakes for Beiruti derby players confronting outside structures through a derby setting. This chapter describes the struggles players experience attempting to expand their community through different media outlets and to get recognition from outside their community. Recognition they seek from the international derby community, local Beiruti communities, and international publics to whom they wish to represent Arab women in unconventional ways. They seek to be recognized as *athletes* before anything else—especially before being classified as Arabs or as women.

A. Intimate publics

> Asked about meeting other roller derby players at the Roller Derby World Summit: "I didn't know anyone. And, they have this attitude that's really amazing. As long as you play derby, then you are one of them already. So it does not get awkward. Usually, when you meet people, in the beginning it's kinda awkward or something. But with them, it wasn't, 'cause the awkward part they just overcome it by the fact you are one of them already."
>
> (Nada Tunis, interviewed by author, Beirut, May 22nd 2017)

I talked to Nada Tunis a couple of days before she went to the Roller Derby World Summit 2017. She was nervous. She was invited as a keynote speaker to represent new roller derby teams in the Global South. She was unsure how other participants would react to her given both that she is an Arab woman and that most of them are experienced players with long and intense involvement in the international roller derby communities. All her fears were put to shame, as the quote above witnesses. She not only felt respected; she felt welcomed as part of a community. As a derby player, she was *one of them* already before she met them.

Roller derby players who have never met often feel connected through the sport. This manifests itself in various ways, for example on social media where derby players will share, like, and comment on other players or teams posts to show their support. When derby players travel, they often contact local teams for housing, to play with them, or to meet and share experiences. In Beirut, we experienced this several times: We have had players from Norway, France, the United Kingdom, and Egypt join our practice after contacting us through our Facebook page. For a new team, this is both helpful—as the foreign players often advise us on how to improve our technical

practice—and it is acknowledging us, relatively inexperienced players, as a welcomed part of the international community.

In the fall 2017, we had two players from CaiRollers, Egypt's roller derby team, visit the team for two weeks. Nermine and Sumer came to play with Beiruthless and to see Lebanon. Karima and Afnan both knew them from summer breaks in Egypt, where they practiced with the team. I suggested to Karima that the two players could stay with me, and she forwarded my number. The messages I received from Sumer the following weeks where loving, appreciative, and always ended with a "Derby Love from Sumer." The players brought the team gifts from Cairo, mostly CaiRoller merchandise (like the sticker that graces my laptop), helped us develop our practice session to improve the technical training of blockers, and joined Beiruti players in dinners and dancing. All of this seemed natural to me; it was a given that because we are derby players, we help each other and enter quickly into friendships.

Roller derby players who have never met are bound together in their shared engagement with and love for the sport—they belong to the same *intimate publics*. Lauren Berlant describes what she calls *intimate publics* as public spheres marked by the "expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff already share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience" (Berlant 2008:viii). Internationally, roller derby players feel connected through the expectation that players share the love of the sport, derby terminology, and values such as inclusion and respect for diversity.

Roller derby originates outside Lebanon. Outside practices and conceptions of the sport present themselves in the narratives of Beiruti athletes. In the US, where roller derby originates, players are often inspired by Third Wave Feminism (cf. Butler

2008[1990], 1993; McRobbie 2009; Scheper-Hughes 1992) and campaigns to challenge heteronormativity (a term often used by derby communities). They speak of mixing 'masculine' (violent and aggressive) behavior on the track with 'feminine', revealing costumes (Whitlock 2012:4-7). Many players are engaged in LGBT activism, and the WFTDA has clear statements about non-discrimination of sexual or gender minorities (WFTDA Diversity and Inclusiveness Statement 2016). When I first met with the players in Beirut, I immediately sensed that they draw on the international roller derby scene for inspiration and motivation and, at the same time, use the sport in a local context as a way to explore and challenge their own gendered identity and the struggles they experience from being socialized as women in specific ways. For example, I noted that they follow the rules set by WFTDA and that they watch games played in the American league and popular cultural productions such as the movie "Whip It" (Berrymore 2009). They do these things not only for inspiration but because it is part of belonging to an international network of roller derby players. Nada Tunis told me during an interview that after she began playing derby, she started "turning feminist," meaning that she is now aware of and concerned with gender and sexuality issues in new ways. This does not mean, however, that she is copying feminism from the U.S.; rather, it suggests that she uses the international derby community to inspire reflection upon her own gendered identity and sexuality in new ways. These reflections include emotional and physical respond to experiences of harassment and discrimination in public spheres. As discussed in Chapter Three, Nada recently told me that she knows, through derby, that she "can beat up" a guy if he bothers her.

The WFTDA celebrates diversity with regards to "socioeconomic status (social class), gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, ability, culture, language, and all of the

categories of social difference that exist among our members" (WFTDA Diversity and Inclusiveness Statement 2016). The WFTDA Diversity and Inclusiveness Statement argues that "diversity makes an organization stronger" (WFTDA Diversity and Inclusiveness Statement 2016). Derby players share these views of respect for diversity, of gender and sexuality's constructedness, and similar experiences of sexual harassment and discrimination as well. All this supports Berlant's suggestion that the participants in the intimate public of roller derby are not just marked by engagement in the same sport, but also, a common lived history:

> [I]t's narratives and things are deemed expressive of that history while also shaping its conventions of belonging; and, expressing the sensational, embodied experience of living as a certain kind of being in the world, it promises also to provide a better experience of social belonging—partly through participation in the relevant commodity culture, and partly because of its revelations about how people can live." (Berlant 2008:viii).

It is not only common histories and narratives expressive of that history that connect the Beiruti derby players to an international network. They use material and social elements that are conventional for belonging to this international network, too. Here I am referring not merely to use of skating gear and adherence to WFTDA's official rules but further to specific *homosocial* behavior (sexual comments, intimate conversations laying on the track, slapping each other's buttocks), consumption of popular productions (movies and comic books with female role models), and application of derby technonyms to signal derby alter egos. By using these social and material elements the players express a certain kind of being in the world while being on the track. It is a form of being that connects them to a wider network of women. As Berlant argues:

> [F]rom a theoretical standpoint, an intimate public is a space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general, what's

> salient for its consumers is that it is a place of recognition and reflection. In an intimate public sphere emotional contact, of a sort, is made. (Berlant 2008:viii)

The Beiruti roller derby players connect themselves emotionally to an international network of derby players by consuming similar products and behaving in internationally conventional ways. They recognize their own struggles in the struggles described by players on WFTDA's webpage and in cultural productions about roller derby. When players from other teams approach us, or share our posts on social media, or when they welcome Nada as "one of them" at the world summit, we experience that we are respected, our struggles are recognized, and belonging to this community validated. Moreover, by subscribing to the worldview (feminism, inclusivity, respect for diversity) associated with derby players internationally, we experience belonging to a larger movement capable of changing the conditions for women worldwide.

B. Outsider publics

> I always tell Nada, can they just let us skate peacefully and fall gracefully—just like in the company of ourselves without having like a photographer coming at you like "Uhh, this is a good shot when you fell down like that."
>
> (Nada Yemen, interviewed by author, Beirut, August 2nd 2017)

In the Fall 2017, the media attention facing Beiruthless reached its highpoint: Journalists joined every other practice, and it started to affect the quality of our practice session. Journalists intervened in the structure of our practice, asking us to play the game at the beginning of practice, to line up while changing into gear, and to repeat our falls: All things we would never do during practice if not for the journalists. During these times, we joked less during practice, started focusing on our appearance by

wearing sportswear that covered more of our bodies (I always wore something with a high neckline, for example), and experimented less with new moves and techniques. At the beginning of the summer, we were fed up with this, and Nada Tunis and Nahla started to prioritize which request, we respond to, and demanding that journalists not interfere with the practice itself. Still, journalists' coming to practice, even when not interfering with commands, interrupts practice. We all missed being "in the company of ourselves," as Nada Yemen put it. By their very presence, journalists changed derby time-space: the liminal zones in which we rethink our subjectivity became a spectacle for unknown audiences. Furthermore, we have learned the hard way that we cannot control how journalists portray us. Many stories distort the team beyond members' recognition. In the next section, I explore the media coverage of the team and the main narratives it deploys to discuss the politicization of Beiruthless and its counter-attempts to control their portrayals by using social media.

1. The politicization of Beiruthless

Even before Beiruthless was a team, online posts about the team proliferated. A Facebook page, *Roller Derby Beirut*, showed up at the end of 2014 (Roller Derby Beirut Facebook 2014). Crowdfunding posts on various platforms followed in the next couple of months (cf. Indiegogo 2015; Derby Central 2015). To get the essential equipment for the team, Elisabeth used crowd-funding web pages and her network in the international derby community to get donations. Remarkably, the crowd-funding pages that she used all mentioned empowering of women in one way or another in their posts about the team. The posts on these pages about Roller Derby Beirut highlighted that donating to a sports team in Beirut would help liberate women. "Elisabeth […] is

doing what many women before her have done [starting a derby league], but her efforts may have a much larger impact," Derby Central wrote (Derby Central 2015). A quote from Ibrahim Hourani, the country director of GAME Lebanon, followed, stating, "If men can respect and help women while they are roller skating, they will also respect them in the marriage" (Derby Central 2015). In such posts, the conjunction of the assertion that starting a derby league in Beirut will have "greater impact" than elsewhere with a statement about male-female power relations in private realms stuns. The statement actually preceded any knowledge of who would participate in this league. Thus, it indicates that all women in Lebanon struggle more with unequal relations to men than women elsewhere, regardless of class background, sectarian affiliations, age, and social relations. My aim in dissecting such posts is not to deny that female-male power relations in Lebanon are problematic in many instances, but rather, to pinpoint the assumptions these online posts form about women in Lebanon homogeneously (and by contrast, about the liberty of women elsewhere, too). It is important to note here that these statements conflict with Elisabeth's motivation for starting the team. When I interviewed her, she emphasized that she wanted to start a derby league to spread the sport, not to liberate anyone. She stressed that she merely wished to give others an opportunity to learn about a sport that she loves, not liberate others from suppressive structures.

A little less than a year after the team's start in 2015, *Huck Magazine*, a youth culture channel and magazine (online and printed) based in London, published a short documentary (6 min 45 sec) entitled, "Shiny Tiny," about Hadeel, one of the players on the team. It focuses on Hadeel's Yemeni background and her living abroad while her family lives in a warzone (Freeman & Kurland 2016). This film only featured

interviews with Hadeel and is, thus, not a piece about the team as a whole. Rather it addresses the war in Yemen from the perspective of a young woman living abroad. It shows images of Hadeel from her daily life and the derby field while she tells about the presence of the war in her daily life: "I have so many moments in my day that goes back and forward from Yemen to here. It makes me actually live with a conflict inside myself, like, how can I be happy while my family is suffering?" Hadeel asks in a voice-over while motion pictures of her skating show (Freeman & Kurland 2016:2:58). She proceeds to explain that playing derby helps her forget about the war for a moment and to laugh with her friends (Freeman & Kurland 2016:18). Beiruthless was proud of this documentary, of being able to draw attention to the war in Yemen by doing this sport. Nada Tunis told me the following during an interview:

> I am really proud of the fact that we got people […] to speak of the war in Yemen. 'Cause, even our media is generally ignoring the war that is going on in Yemen, and people don't even know […]. If what we are doing is gonna fade away in a couple of years, at least we still have that […]. The fact that we got them to talk about this.
>
> (Nada Tunis, interviewed by author, Beirut, May 22nd 2017)

The pride of raising awareness about the situation in Yemen faded somewhat with the pieces that followed the documentary. While *Shiny Tiny* is clear in its focus on Hadeel, the article that accompanied the film on *Huck Magazine*'s webpage, entitled, "A Story of Sisterhood and Escapism," calls the players "pioneers" and "architects of a new future" several times, both referencing their playing an unconventional sport and their studying at the American University in Beirut.

> While their families remain confined by conflict, and their homes become ravaged by war, Hadeel and her teammates are channeling all their energy into the promise of a better future, bolstered by their academic studies and the community spirit that they've fostered together. (Huck Magazine 2016A)

While this might be true for the Yemeni players on the team, it seems far-fetched to generalize Hadeel's experience to all players, regardless of their backgrounds.

Two more articles from *Huck Magazine* followed: A longer feature article entitled "The badass pioneers of Lebanon's first female roller derby team," and a shorter article, "The punk and riot grrrl sounds driving Beirut's fearless Roller Derby pioneers." The latter of these is perhaps the most misguided article I have read about the team. It explores what bands could be used to soundtrack the lives of the players and lists a range of different punk bands (Huck Magazine 2016B), none of which the players listen to (most of them prefer pop music, rap, or soft rock). The longer article was initially published in the "Defiance Issue" of *Huck Magazine* and later posted online. The publishing context alone formed a narrative about the team that persisted in other media outlets. It removed focus from the team as a community of athletes and centered focus on their "radical verve" and their "revolutionary" lives (Holland 2017). The article itself is split into two: the first part focusing on the team and the second focusing on Hadeel's story. The first part begins with a description of a game situation in which players' wearing head scarfs occurs twice. Here is one example: "Protective pads and helmets are adjusted, mouth guards are in place, the trailing ends of headscarves are tucked into mesh sports vests" (Holland 2017). While some players wear headscarves and others do not, a fact that is later mentioned in this article, it is striking that the headscarves are mentioned twice in the descriptions of the players while other visible markers, such as the piercings and tattoos some of the players have or their athletic built, are not.

The focus on hijabs concerns the players greatly. One of the players who wear hijab told me about how journalists sometimes request to interview "a hijabi player"

specifically and how she feels it reduces her to a symbol of Islam or of Muslim women fighting assumed suppression: "They [journalists] make it sound like those who are wearing hijabs are playing to go against the stereotypes […] I hate it when they drift from the sport itself and make it about religion or politics," she told me. Like the first article from *Huck magazine*, the "Defiance Issue" article portrays the players as pioneers who embody the potential for a new future for the MENA-region *because* they are female athletes playing a high-intensity full contact sport and because of their studies (Holland 2017). Bringing the hijab into descriptions of game situations emphasizes the Arab-Muslim identity of the players, since headscarves and other forms covering have been highly debated in the last couple of decades in Europe and North America and head coverage has become one a potent symbol of Islam as well as a mean of objectifying Islam (Scott 2007:6).[9]

The articles from *Huck Magazine* elicited a series of articles, a podcast, and several reposts of the video, from other media, all spinning off the original stories from *Huck Magazine*, but without the nuances that *Huck Magazine*, at least in some parts of their articles, included (cf. Collard 2016; D'Ignoti 2017B; Yan 2017). Local media also followed up on these narratives. Al-Hurra produced a small documentary about the team which partially focused on Hadeel, a repetition of the escapism narrative from Huck magazine, and partially on the team as a whole. The part about the team as a whole describes how the team started and features interviews with players telling about their dream of competing internationally (Al-Hurra 2017). Descriptions of how the team started, what roller derby is, and the problems the team faces with getting more Lebanese players to make the team sustainable have been the theme of a few local news

[9] Debates about banning the veil have been remarkably prevalent in France where a ban of "conspicuous signs" of religious beliefs in public schools was enforced in 2004, aimed mostly at the Muslim girls wearing headscarves (Scott 2007:1,6).

pieces as well (cf. Sharif, 2017; LBC 2017; Nahla 2017). These descriptions, while often short, are important for the team to get the local exposure in order to get more players. Still, the local exposure is minimal compared to its international counterpart.

Experiences with journalists explicitly asking to interview Yemeni players and hijab-wearing players made the team members feel stuck between two narratives: Either as victims of war-torn countries or as pioneers defying violent structures. The team is actively trying to change both these escapism and defiance narratives. At team meetings, the players discuss requests from journalists, trying to take at least some control over how they are represented. Karima took the floor in one team meeting discussing a request from a journalist and what framings we should refuse. "We are not victims, and we are not heroes," she said with reference to the articles that portray the players as either pioneers or as victims. The rest of us agreed with approving gestures and laughter at her word choice.

With an increasing number of Arab refugees in Europe, the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria and with "the war on terror,"[10] debates about Muslim and Arab citizens in the Global North have increased drastically in scale and intensity. Part of the rhetoric, especially among the far right, where opposition to non-western (particularly Middle East origin) immigrants and refugees flourishes, fixates on gender roles and the presumed suppression of "their" women. A similar rhetoric can be found in justifications for foreign interventions in the Middle East (cf. Abu Lughod 2002). Often analogies to medieval customs in Europe describe the misogynist practices that are imagined to be conducted by "the cultural other": the Muslim man. This both creates a discourse of the self as culturally superior and assumes that gendered human

[10] The so-called "War on Terror" was initiated by former American President George W. Bush in 2001 following the September 11th attacks on World Trade Center and Pentagon (The Guardian 2001).

suffering can be pinpointed, understood, and explained outside the lived experiences of the women who embody this assumed suffering. In the mentioned discourses, it seems as if, as Joan Scott notes, patriarchy and suppression of women are uniquely Islamic phenomena (Scott 2007:4).

A dangerous assumption behind this rhetoric is the universalization of the concept of woman. Distinctions between masculine and feminine, between male signifiers and female signifiers, seem common in most languages and vernacular as well as political discourses. Nevertheless, *what* is masculine and what feminine varies depending on factors such as class, labor market relations, age, ethnicity, sexuality, and social relations, as well as individual experiences (Ghoussoub & Sinclair-Webb 2006:8). To assume that the struggles of Arab-Muslim women resemble the historical struggles of European women is to disregard the different trajectories of gendered struggles, their distinct positions in global economic structures, and the vast divergences of regional, class, sexuality, and age factors.

I propose to understand the representations of Beiruthless within the contexts of the prevalent debates about Arab-Muslim women mentioned above. These representations were my first introduction to this field of study and shaped my initial interest in the team. I, too, understood their motivations for doing an unconventional sport by placing them in the Arab-Islamic world. After almost two years' involvement with the team, it is striking how much my perceptions have changed and how misguided I see these representations are. To counter these misguided narratives, Nada Tunis decided to emphasize that these representations are in her speech at the Roller Derby World Summit 2017. She told the audience which mainly consisted of derby players

from other regions of the world that Beiruthless struggles with journalists portraying team members as "clichés of Arab women breaking stereotypes." She stressed that:

> If we do shake the system, it's purely a side effect. When we wake up on Sunday morning to get ready and head to practice, we don't have in mind the lethal patriarchal system we live in or the narrow-mindedness of our fellow countrymen. What gets us out of bed on a Sunday morning is the pleasure that comes with skating. Simply put, we just want to skate.

When journalists assume that players are fighting violent structures and fostering change in regards to gender relations by playing derby, they take away focus from the actual motivations for playing derby: enjoyment of the game itself. While their representations might not be incorrect per se, they are, at best, a selected truth and a naïve reproduction of stereotypes; at worst, they symptomize violent structures restraining athletes from doing a sport they love. If the latter is true, it is ironic that journalists, especially those from the Global North, describe how Beiruthless is fighting violent structures (read patriarchy in the Arab-Islamic world), whilst subjecting the team members to the violent structure of othering Arab-Muslim woman.

The team has decided to take matters into our own hands by selecting only requests from journalists that seem trustworthy with regards to accurate representations, by making demands for how journalists can deal with the team, and by focusing on our own external communication. The latter, I deal with in the next subsection.

2. Social media, sharing photos, and intensification

Figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3: Pictures shared on Roller Derby Beirut Facebook page

Beiruthless share photos from practice on our Facebook group. At times, we livestream from practice or upload small film clips as well. The aim of doing so is to connect with other derby teams, mobilize new players, and show our followers (families, friends, other derby players) our progress. With the intense media coverage, the page gained another purpose: to show that we are a group of individuals who love the sport of roller derby and have fun engaging with the sport. As Nahla phrased her media strategy: "[I want] to familiarize their existence. They are not just a bunch of brown women, no!" The photos shared on the group page include pictures of game situations, selfies from our skating on the corniche, and group photos of the team (see Figures 3.1–3.3). In addition to this group-engineered sharing, individual players share pictures from roller derby on social media (see Figure 3.4 for example), and some have derby images as profile pictures or cover photos on Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram. Families, friends, and other derby players often comment and like posts, both on the *Roller Derby Beirut* page and on the pages of team members. These responses both make the team feel supported and work as an intensification of some derby based sensations: When we receive comment such as, "Cool," or, "You guys are amazing," it intensifies our feelings of being a *badass* group of women. Likewise, when

a post is shared and liked many times, we feel acknowledged and supported as athletes through the interest from others.

Figure 4.4: Post on Afnan's Instagram "We kick ass. #rollerderby"

In opposition to posts that circulate primarily amongst our friend groups, families, and derby communities, the media outlets that have published pieces about the team also post on their social media platforms. These professional posts get much more exposure and receive comments and "likes" from people outside our personal circles and even outside the international derby community. Some of these posts are seen by a huge number of people: *Huck Magazine*'s post of their documentary, *Shiny Tiny*, has more than 240,000 views and has been shared more than 2,500 times on Facebook (see Figure 4.5). This is an enormous exposure which the team on the one hand appreciates as it helps us recruit new members and get sponsors for gear and sportswear, but, on the other hand, has elicited comments from internet trolls depicting stereotypes about suppression of Muslim-Arab women—the most shocking of which, in my opinion, is: "And then when they go home they get raped by their fathers and husbands."

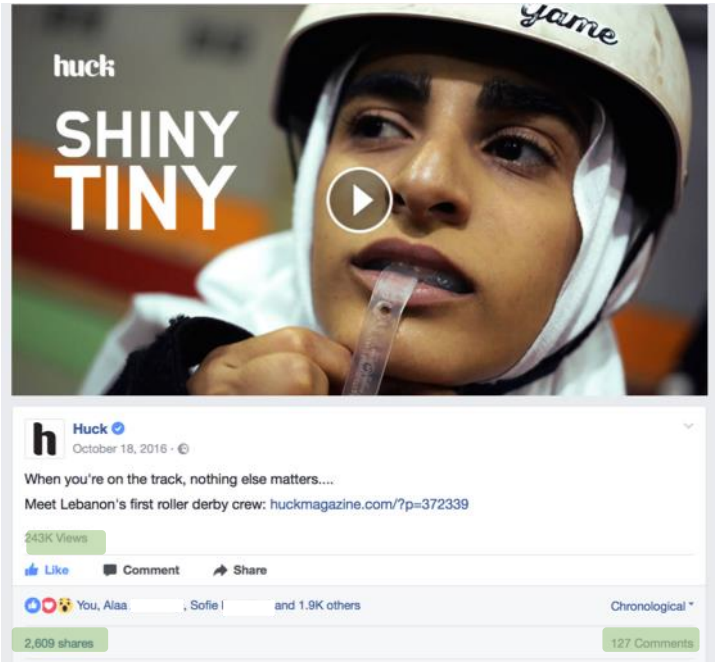


Figure 4.5: Huck Magazine Facebook Post "Shiny Tiny" (My highlights of Views, Shares, and Comments)

In conclusion, media coverage, including that on social media, cannot be controlled by the team. It is important for the team to get exposure in order to recruit new members and to get sponsors. But on the other hand, the players often do not recognize themselves in the ways they are represented, especially by journalists from the Global North. Furthermore, the presence of journalists interrupts practice sessions and by this enforces outside structures on derby practice: Players no longer feel free to joke in the same ways when a journalist is present, for example. The team is attempting to work out ways to gain control over our interactions with journalists by being selective in which requests we respond to and set rules for journalists who come to see us practice (forbidding interruptions in our structuring of practice sessions, for example). This, along with using our own Facebook page as a platform for external communication, is with the hope that the team will be able to recognize itself in future

representations and to regain time-space to play derby together with no outsiders interrupting.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this thesis, I have explored the lives of young, female Beiruti athletes through the angle of feelings and sensations. I have discussed the opportunities roller derby players seek through the sport with regards to affective experimentations with subjectivities and inter-player relations in altered time-spaces as wells as the ways in which these opportunities are distorted by intense media attention facing the team.

I started off with a discussion of sensations on the derby track in their qualitatively manifold appearances through mini-case studies into the seemingly odd quartet of *excitement*, *liberty*, *pain*, and *toughness*—All derby-based sensations produced by various bodies, material and immaterial, which engulf players on the track and transform the players as they live sensations. Excitement, for example, relates to chaotic transferences of energy between bodies that overwhelm players and makes agency-patiency generally conceived of as binary in fact interchangeable. Liberty refers to players sensing pure potential while being on the derby track; for themselves, for the team, for everything, even what seems completely disconnected from roller derby. Pain exists both in material and immaterial forms: it presents itself both as a concrete material manifestation located in the body, but also as potential future pains and as past experiences with pain. Furthermore, pain is present for non-injured team members through their connections to injured players. Lastly, toughness both denotes the feelings

of being physically tough, strong and persistent in game situations, and of being mentally tough; able to endure pain, for example. On the track, physical toughness and mental toughness interrelates: Realizing one's physical ability engender bravery and gumption.

All of these are shared, not solitary, sensations that run through several bodies: we, the players, share sensations of *excitement*, *liberty*, *pain*, and *toughness*. Adding to this, sensations participate in each other, overlap, mix, and overwhelm each other in infinite ways.

I have also shown that on-the-track sensing is provoked by altered structures: As derby players make space for changing space, and time for changing time, roller derby practice largely negates outside structures, proffering a Turnerian antistructure. Derby practice forms liminal zones in which players engage with each other in ways unheard of outside the track; behavior is violent and competitive, jokes are cruel and sexual, and players present their tough alter-egos through derby technonyms. When we players behave in new ways and experiment with social and material elements, we rediscover our subjectivities, who we can become. These experimentations are both engendered by our *sisterhood*, or *communitas* in Victor Turner's terminology, and reproduce that very sisterhood, our shared bond.

Communitas and interactions in altered time-spaces engender derby-based sensations. Bodies, in the broadest sense of the word, affect other bodies. On the derby track, physical bodies of players, skates and gear, inter-player relations, and the *sisterhood* of the team all affect each other and are affected by each other. When bodies interact, their abilities to affect and be affected involve transitions from one state of being to another: Players' ability to affect and be affected are in play, for example,

when patiency-agency become interchangeable during game interactions. Roller derby practices are chaotic interactions between bodies, material and immaterial, and foster transmutations out of our control and in unpredictable ways. Affect is key to understanding the stakes of playing roller derby, as variations in bodies' capacities to act, to affect and be affected, transform players and foster changes in their off-track lives, as when a player realizes that she can pummel a harasser.

Living in the transitional stages of derby practice is essential to what I call *becoming Beiruthless*: Team members live through a constant becoming, a becoming that has already been initiated, but is never fully accomplished. A becoming that is *real in itself*. Our being on the derby track and our living in *becoming derby players* are affective ways of living in pasts and (future) potentialities unfolding in the present and in outside spaces that present themselves on the derby track through their negations.

Bodies incorporate affect on the track. They take it up and qualify it into meaning in ways they most probably would not have off-track. Affects present themselves in meaningful ways outside the track when players realize that they have changed their ways of living and sensing outside the derby-time space, for example when encountering harassment and realizing that they can defend themselves, physically and mentally. In these ways, roller derby coordinates sports-based sensations into other subjectivities, by bringing the players together around practice and scrimmage, and by rearranging their relationships to the sensations. These experiences are ultimately transformative, which manifests itself outside the track. Chapter Two formed a longer discussion of the ways in which movements, changes, and sensations in the liminal zones of derby practice allow for rediscoveries of *gendered*, *aged*, and *social* identities—how intensified experiences allow for players to experience themselves as

freer or more liberated and as stronger, mentally and physically. Derby practice is both a rupture, a break from everything that is dull and routine, and a *time-space* for change and development—a vector for changing the ordinary.

In the last chapter of this thesis, I investigated the stakes of outsiders, —specifically journalists— interfering with derby practice—interrupting *communitas,* on-track experimentations, and leaving the players frustrated. The very presence of an outsider on the track changes the practice setting. While Beiruthless has become stricter with regards to which journalists can watch our practices as well as when and how they can interact with us, we cannot control the ways in which they present us to outsider audiences. Beirut's derby team feature in many journalistic publications as "a rebellious group" of young Arab, Muslim women doing a sport as either gender activism, an outlet for their aggravations towards patriarchy, or as a form of escapism, helping them to forget the horrors of their lives. This sharply contrasts our own experiences and move focus from our actual motivations for playing derby: the joy of the game itself.

In contrast to the ways in which affective encounters on the derby track get incorporated into subjectivities through sensation and rearrange players' relationship to sensation in transformative ways, the encounters with journalists and experiences with being presented in ways we do not recognize ourselves in, makes outside structures press up against the derby track. Players fight this through the teams own external communication and by making demands to journalists who want to write about the team. Players engage in roller derby because they love the sport and not to fight for political rights. In a derby context, they are athletes before they are Arabs and women.

Becoming Beiruthless is more than just learning to play: it is a willingness to engage with a sport without knowing how this might impact us; as young women, as

friends, and as athletes. It is experimentations with the ways in which we move—sense—live our existence and ultimately it is moving—sensing—living together in our transmutations and partaking in the transmutations of fellow players.

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