

HYPERSEXUALITY, MISOGYNY, AND POSSIBILITY IN WOMEN'S RUGBY

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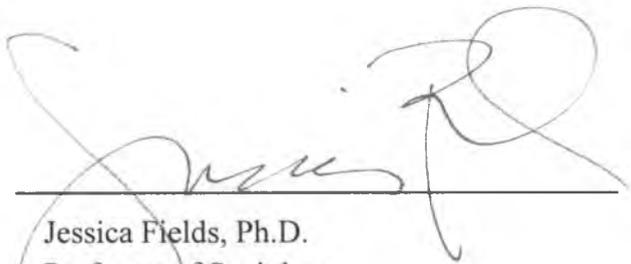
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San Francisco, California

May 2016

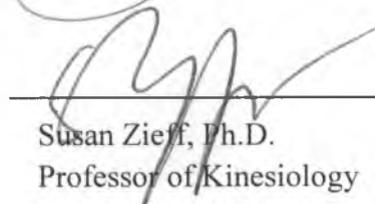
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I certify that I have read *Hypersexuality, Misogyny, and Possibility in Women's Rugby* by Cameron Garvey Michels, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Sexuality Studies at San Francisco State University.



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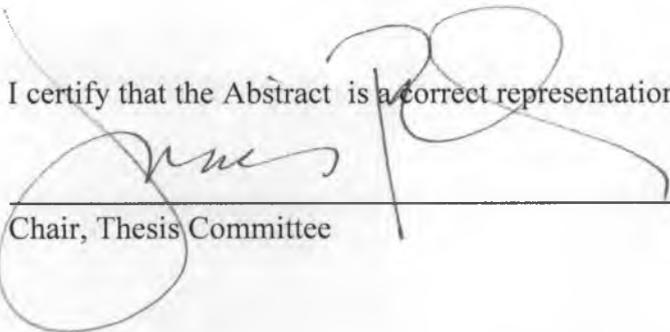
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# HYPERSEXUALITY, MISOGYNY, AND POSSIBILITY IN WOMEN'S RUGBY

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2016

Rugby is the only organized sport women play that has the same rules and equipment as the men's version of the game. Previous scholars have used this idea to present rugby women as exceptional, liberated, and different from other women's sports and pursuits. I argue for a more complicated understanding of women's rugby culture. Echoing ideas presented in Matthew Ezzell's study of rugby playing "Barbie dolls" and Ariel Levy's investigation into "raunch culture," I argue, like my predecessors, that the liberatory potential of this team emerges in a context of hypersexuality and misogyny. What this criticism fails to recognize and what I explore in this paper are the promises and pleasures that also characterize players' experiences. Rugby is response to players' frustration with aspects of society and feminism. Moving beyond declaring women's rugby as either a site of liberation or misogyny, players' experiences can be thought of as part of an intergenerational feminist dialogue and an argument for misbehavior.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.

  
Chair, Thesis Committee

May 25, 2016  
Date

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## Introduction

Women's rugby is a world of extremes. Ryan describes their first rugby practice,<sup>1</sup>

It was muddy and rainy and we were still just going at it! We were just like covered in mud and everyone was just hitting each other and it was just like this is great! Oh my god! It was so—it was a fucking revelation! It was an epiphany! I came home and I was like, “I am doing this! I am doing this always!”

As Ryan's passionate retelling suggests, the possibilities offered by the rugby community are multiple. Women's rugby is the only organized sport women play that has the same rules and equipment as the men's game. A culture and a narrative of exceptionalism are built upon this notion. Players breathlessly rush in with an expectation that their involvement in this sport will provide them with alternatives to society's lackluster options for women. They work hard and make sacrifices in order to maintain this community and its promise to break down boundaries and introduce them to a global family of rugby players and enthusiasts.

Rugby culture also supports players as they question dominant heteronormative ideas of women's bodies and sexualities. Rugby teams necessarily require different types of bodies to be successful, and players connect this mandate with a larger agenda of bodily acceptance and positivity. Players position this different way of experiencing and thinking about their bodies in opposition to dominant social tropes that demand women look a certain way—petite, feminine, and heterosexually available—and remain unhappy

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis, I will use the pronouns my participants preferred. Ryan used they/them/their pronouns.

until they achieve that standard. Rugby requires these players use their bodies in new ways that challenge dominant ideas of femininity. They hit other players and celebrate one another's size and strength in ways not usually experienced outside of the game and the community.

Rugby also provides players with an embodied sense of sexual freedom and possibility. The community embraces and emphasizes queerness in ways many players relish. Women find on the pitch and in social gatherings opportunities to explore their sexualities and people to help them in this exploration. The team provides not only an arena in which players can be unabashedly queer but also a world in which players have access to other queer people with to be physically intimate and desirous. Players feel privileged to exist in a queer social world in which they can touch and have sex with other women. They are thrilled to reject ideas of respectability.

This idealized space is, however, as complicated as any other. As possibilities expand for rugby players, the usual social boundaries relax; and, as players become less vigilant, misogyny too often creeps in (Ezzell, 2009; Levy, 2006). Although players affirm that rugby has helped them accept and appreciate their bodies, many continue to struggle with the all too common problem of hating their female bodies. They struggle with wanting to be recognized and rewarded for adhering to dominant ideals of femininity while also wanting to exist outside of these standards. It turns out, rugby stands adjacent to, not independent of, normative ideas about women and femininity. Other misogynist standards also infiltrate the possibilities rugby offers. The culture of

sexual queerness and availability that players celebrate is sometimes unkind to and even exploitative of other women. Players use language and engage in behaviors that risk reproducing misogyny and violence, pitting them against the ideals of women's liberation and sexual possibility that draw so many of them to the pitch in the first place.

One response to this tension would be to dismiss these women's efforts as fundamentally sexist and not to grapple with the complicated pleasures and promises that this culture provides (see, for example, Ezzell, 2009). However, to simply critique rugby culture would be to ignore what players find so compelling about their engagement. Rugby players are among the many millennial educated queer women who are unsatisfied with social norms and expectations (Gay, 2014). In this study, I ask how feminist sociological scholars can acknowledge the possibilities offered by the rugby team and other alternative sexual and gender cultures, while also addressing the limitations of forms of expression and interactions that continue to be defined by heteronormative and patriarchal norms. I offer an analysis of women's rugby that sheds light not only on how women create communities and engage in contact sports but also on the implications of these communities and engagements for mainstream feminist movements and visions.

### **Review of the Literature**

Women in contact sports have long fascinated scholars who have attempted to document and explain their apparent deviance. Research has focused on the ways these women negotiate their gender and sexuality as they deviate from gendered norms and

expectations. For some scholars, women's rugby is a site of liberation, a place where women can have embodied experiences of strength and abandon otherwise unavailable in mainstream culture. Players appear brave in their transgression and subversion of dominant ideals of femininity (Chase, 2006; Gill, 2007; Shockley, 2005), and the rugby community is praised for accepting and celebrating queerness and flouting ideas of respectability (Broad, 2001; Fields & Comstock, 2008; Shockley, 2005).

Critical voices have pointed to misogynistic and patriarchal ideas and practices that persist in rugby culture. Mathew Ezzell, for example, argues that rugby women reinforce dominant ideals of gender and sexuality through defensive othering tactics and sexual objectification (Ezzell, 2009). He concludes that the team he studied is not as liberated as initial appearance would suggest because of their reliance on a "heterosexy-fit presentation of self"—an essentialized feminine appearance privileging the male gaze. Sports are not the only seemingly liberatory site where women's participation has been scrutinized. Ezell's critique echoes Ariel Levy's exploration of "raunch culture" in which women watch porn, go to strip clubs, and otherwise pursue conventionally masculinist pleasures in the name of female empowerment (Levy, 2006). Levy is unimpressed by these claims to empowerment and argues these women are merely repackaging misogyny for capitalism's sake. Arguments like Ezell's and Levy's posit supposedly feminist communities and experiences as surprisingly conservative and their liberatory promise for women underwhelming.

The hyper-sexualized nature of these communities seems integral to their distinctiveness, their liberatory potential, and the misogynistic, patriarchal ideas and practices that persist within their boundaries (Comella, 2008). Behaviors that rugby players celebrate are readily defined outside their community as sexual objectification, harassment, and assault. This tension is not peculiar to rugby. Scholars have looked at sexual harassment of women in the workplace, from car repair shops to academia, stating over and over the pervasiveness of the problem (Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Gruber, 1998; Gruber & Bjorn, 1982; Jahren, 2016). In one study, a hospital worker described the pleasure she found in such interactions. She resented proposed sexual harassment policies that would limit the fun she had engaging with her male colleagues in what she described as an entertaining and harmless sexual exchange (Williams, Giuffre, & Dellinger, 1999).

What are scholars and feminists to make of this resentment? Williams, Giuffre, and Dellinger end their piece with a note that sexual banter in the workplace does not “preclude the possibility of dangerous or damaging outcomes” (Williams et al., 1999, p. 91). They acknowledge the pleasure of the experience while reasserting the existence of complicated power differentials that result in an unequal distribution of potential harm. They also state that these dynamics privilege certain people and certain sexualities and minority groups are usually left out—not of the exploitation, but of the ability to enjoy it.

But what of the pleasure women not only in sexual exchanges but also in putting their bodies on display, breaking gendered rules, and refusing to conform to expectations of respectable behavior. Writing off their experiences as just sexual harassment misses

that these women feel liberated in this social world. Feminist critiques of everyday sexualization risk failing to address the pleasure that can coincide with apparent exploitation and to recognize the pleasure in bodily display. Feminist authors also suggest paths that allow scholars to avert this risk. Pornography studies is one exemplary site. For example, the authors of *The Feminist Porn Book* attempt to untangle just these issues as they assert that pornography provides women and racial and sexual minorities a place to express pleasure and power (Taormino, Penley, Shimizu, & Miller-Young, 2013; see also [Bernstein, 1999; Comella, 2008]). Writing off sites like rugby and pornography for their proximity to and rearticulation of violence and misogyny misses not only the experience of existing in these spaces, but also the possibilities located in these spaces.

## **Methods**

The analysis I present here draws on a qualitative study of members of a club women's rugby team. In the Fall of 2015, I joined the Panthers (pseudonym), an elite women's club rugby team in Northern California. Unlike the teams that have been the focus of much previous scholarship on women's rugby, the Panthers are not associated with a university. I chose this club because they are a nationally recognized team committed to promoting women's rugby across differences in age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender expression. Team members are also diverse in their experiences and motivations for playing women's rugby after college. As Figure 1 suggests, study participants reflect the team's diversity in race, age, sexuality, and rookie/veteran status, allowing me to explore in these pages a range of relationships between identity and

experiences of rugby culture's promise and limitations. Rookies are new players on the team, and veterans have been on the team for at least one year.

Figure 1: Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Sexuality	Race/ethnicity	Rookie/Veteran	Age
Alex	Bisexual	White	Rookie	26
Amber	Gay	White	Rookie	23
Anna	Bisexual	Filipino and white	Veteran	33
Casey	<i>Did not identify</i>	Japanese	Veteran	32
Hailey	Heterosexual	African American	Veteran	25
Kaitlin	Straight	White	Veteran	29
Rachel	Pansexual	Jewish	Rookie	25
Ryan	Queer	White	Rookie	22
Summer	Bisexual	Chinese and Finnish	Veteran	28
Theresa	Lesbian	Latina	Veteran	30

During the Fall 2015 and Spring 2016 seasons, I conducted ten open-ended semi-structured qualitative interviews with members of the Panthers (Esterberg, 2001). Interviews ranged from 50 minutes to almost two hours. I audio recorded the interviews, transcribed them and—soon after transcription—wrote an extensive analytical memo (or “notes on notes”) exploring emergent themes (Kleinman & Copp 1993). I ended the data collection process once I had reached what I determined to be saturation, a phenomenon in which the data obtained from interviews primarily echoes data gathered in earlier

interviews and further data collection is unlikely to yield new insights into emerging topics (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

In the data analysis phase of my research, I used open coding to identify key themes from the interviews (Esterberg, 2001). I then used axial coding to find linkages between these themes (Esterberg, 2001). Focusing on the linkages and intersections of the themes helped me explore how these concepts are interacting in the social world. This process builds on grounded theory methods in which researchers analyze their data inductively, developing theories based on observed social phenomena (Charmaz, 1983; Esterberg, 2001).

I am a feminist sociological thinker and a member of the Panthers. In order to balance my commitments to academia, to the Panthers, and to rugby culture, I presented initial analyses to my thesis meeting group—a sexually diverse group of white women who are all sexuality scholars with deep commitments to intersectional feminism. As they are not rugby players, their comments were invaluable in helping me recognize the influence of my insider status on my interpretation of the data. They pointed out themes and issues I did not immediately recognize and sometimes did not want to hear. For example, I was caught off-guard when they identified moments in my interviews as sexual harassment and evidence of rape culture. I was taken aback by their descriptions of the team's behavior and disappointed I had not thought about the criticism on my own. These insights became pivotal to my analysis, as the pages that follow will make clear.

As much as my membership on the team was in tension with my feminism, it also facilitated my access to research participants and my insights into rugby culture. My approach to this study is informed by my experiences on rugby teams and my attachment to the culture. Rugby has given me, like many other women, access to meaningful friendships, liberatory understandings of my body, and confidence I had never before experienced. As a rugby woman, I was aware of cultural norms and expectations that allowed me to integrate myself with the Panthers players. I was able to establish myself as an insider before asking potential study participants to let me interview them. I occupied a certain role on this rugby team as a white woman, a rookie and a “confused straight girl.” I am a teammate and friend to the players and that affects the nature of the interview and the data that I was able to collect. For example, I initially began interviewing people on the team who I was closer with to ease myself into interviews. As I expanded my sample, I found that the interview itself made me closer to people I was not initially as close with— an unexpected benefit for me. Anna, one of the players, pointed out that the interviews exist on the spectrum of ongoing conversations among team members about sex and sexuality. Because of this, the Panthers’ pre-established modes of communication dictated the tone of the interviews.

In particular, gossip and flirtation proved invaluable to the data collection process. Gossip is a theme and a tool in rugby culture and in my interviews. Feminist scholars have recognized gossip as a means for relaying important information within communities of women (Hoagland, 1989; Jones, 1980). Players invest time in this team

and depend on their teammates during games. Information about teammates concerns each player not only in their social lives but also on the pitch, where rugby games happen. Players worry that what the players call “drama” off the pitch will affect the team culture at large and performance in games specifically. Interviews tapped into these established practices and became opportunities to gossip about teammates: study participants gossiped, and they invited me to gossip with them. I remained a member of the culture’s moral world and did not reject gossip out of hand (Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011). I failed to answer the call to gossip in instances when I did not know the information: when a player wanted me to confirm whether or not two teammates they assume have slept together actually have. Other times though, I answered the call, recognizing it as not only an invitation, but also a test. Asking me to confirm or deny rumors during an interview allowed players to check my commitments to them as well as academia. If I were to refuse to gossip, players might suspect I had chosen my commitment to academia over my loyalty to the Panthers and to rugby. Conscious of these implications, I generally chose to gossip with study participants when I had the information they were looking for.

Flirtation, the other surprising tool, initially provided a way to ease tension in the interview and to alleviate some of my anxiety. This is especially true in the conversation about bodies. I wanted to ensure my participants enjoyed themselves, and flirting is one way that I could make that happen (Newton, 1993). A much relied upon technique of communication on the rugby team, flirtation in the interviews not only created a fun and

pleasurable atmosphere, but also communicated my insider status to the players (Kaspar & Landolt, 2016). Flirtation allowed me to reassure study participants I could be trusted to accurately report their stories to outsiders. However, interviewing—and flirting with—people with whom you are close raises a set of complications I did not anticipate. The shared language and mode of communication initially afforded me an entryway, but I struggled not to lean too heavily against these strategies for gaining and maintaining access. To do so might have excused me from questioning participants’ word choices or detangling complex ideas. Informed and complicated by my membership on this rugby team, this study on women’s rugby and sexuality is inevitably a reflection of and on myself.

## **Community**

### *Prioritizing Community*

Players’ hard work and sacrifice are central to rugby community. As the Panthers are not affiliated with a school, members have to pay to participate; they also invest the time that might otherwise be devoted to other pursuits. This investment helps ensure the team is successful on the pitch, but, perhaps more important, this work is necessary for the team to distance itself from mainstream society. Theresa, a 30-year-old Latina lesbian veteran player, states, “People are really committed. You have to pay a lot more and travel a lot further and they don’t have the support of the school.” In college, where many study participants first played rugby, schools provide resources and players do not have

as many competing commitments. Outside of the supportive collegiate environment, rugby represents more of a strain. Theresa elaborates, “The rugby team I’m on takes up a lot of time and a lot of energy and a lot of money... probably better use of my time would be working at my job because I always have work to do.” Theresa believes her commitment to her team detracts from resources she could be allocating to her job. Since, according to Theresa, her job would “probably be a better use” of her time, rugby participation has become less practical after college. It is still, however, worth the investment every week.

Players’ sacrifices extend beyond time and money; their commitment to rugby and the Panthers team limits their ability to explore other groups and outside relationships. Sports teams mimic near-total institutions, controlling the majority of players’ lives (Anderson, 2008). Young women athletes build social worlds around their sport, and their sporting community dictates their friends and their priorities (Lenskyj, 2003). When I asked Amber, a white gay 23-year-old rookie player, to compare the rugby team to other groups she belongs to, she hesitated and laughed, “It’s hard cus that is the aspect of my life.” Amber could name no other group; rugby occupies the privileged position in her life.

Amber was not the only player who had difficulty with this question. Other players described struggling relationships or other interests outside of rugby culture. Summer, a Chinese and Finnish bisexual 28-year-old veteran player, explained,

It's a huge time commitment... that leaves so little time for other relationships in my life and there was a point in my life when rugby was my life. At college I didn't do anything but play rugby and I loved it. It was great but like I have certain regrets of that like I don't know I didn't really get involved in other clubs or really reach out to the people on my floor.

Summer identifies the time she spends playing rugby, on the pitch and socially, as time she might have devoted to other projects, passions, and opportunities. Like Amber, Summer describes rugby as the only thing she did in college (certainly an overstatement—but a telling one) and regrets that she did not pursue friendships or romantic relationships outside the team. And, as Summer describes later in the interview, “I’m at that point in my life where those, the opportunities, might be more important... I have competing priorities at this point... I don’t know... but it’s also like rugby’s become my identity at this point.” Now out of college, Summer continues to struggle in untangling her identity from her rugby team and community. She has other interests and priorities but is unsure how to pursue them since she has privileged her rugby identity and commitments for so long.

Some players do manage to create romantic relationships with people outside of the community, but their rugby participation often has a negative impact on those relationships. It can be a source of conflict, as Kaitlin, a straight white 29-year-old veteran player, explains:

I had one ex-boyfriend who was really against the rugby thing... he was like “You’re always putting rugby before me” and stuff... It’s like really? So that kid was an idiot... but rugby was a big thing for him. Like “How dare you? Like why are you playing such a sport like this?” And I’m like, “This is my life, dammit!”

Like the other team members, Kaitlin has worked hard and made sacrifices for her rugby team. Her commitment became a source of tension in her relationship—a tension that ultimately could not be resolved and that contributed to the relationship's demise. Her ex-boyfriend's failure to understand or appreciate the community and its importance to Kaitlin disappointed her, and she ultimately could not see past his resentment of her belonging to the team.

Rugby defines these players' lives. They make significant sacrifices and regularly fail to look beyond the team for a sense of community or opportunity. After a significant investment of time, money, and commitment, the rugby community provides players with new ways to experience and view their positions in the world, making sacrifices seem minor.

### *Breaking Boundaries*

Membership in the rugby community allows players to envision opportunities beyond the usual geographical and gendered limits. The team becomes a network of players working to achieve alternative measures of success. Anna, a 33-year-old bisexual Filipina and white veteran player, states, "It's literally, is one big happy family like that stretches literally around the globe... You can go anywhere. I could go to Ireland and have a kickass time with fucking rugby people... I really could. You know, versus regular ass people." For Anna, the rugby community provides a means to travel anywhere in the world armed with the confidence that she will find some "family" and have a "kick ass

time.” This family and these experiences are not available to “regular ass people.” Rugby players like Anna relish rugby’s ability to help them imagine possibilities unavailable to most of their peers.

Ryan, a queer white genderqueer 22-year-old rookie player, echoed this idea, employing a narrative of exceptionalism that fosters an intense bond among rugby players:

Just the travel aspect of it! You get so many opportunities to go so many places and meet so many people and really build a community that’s so broad and expansive...I have beds I could crash on in pretty much any state, any country, anywhere.

Ryan is confident they have a variety of options should they ever become bored with their current life. Sensing they could travel anywhere in the world and find some sort of rugby connection and a community, players like Ryan do not feel limited to either a certain geographic place or, by extension, a rigid vision of their futures.

As the world gets bigger, so too do players’ understandings of accomplishment. Many reject conventional measures of success and center other achievements in their lives. Casey, a 33-year-old Japanese veteran player, did not tell her parents when she started playing rugby. Her sister eventually told them, and they were not pleased. She recalls her parents wearily asking, “Can’t you just like sit at home and cook and read a book and like other normal-ish things?” Casey responded, “No, I’m really bored with that.” Rugby is just one of the many things Casey does that offends gendered social expectations. She expands, “Like all of the things that parents hope for you to be safe and

happy and successful, like, I'm just not doing any one." In contrast, she describes her sister's life with a husband and a kid and a car and identifies those accomplishments as "normal American things." Casey consistently rejects these standard measurements of success for women. She does not find them fulfilling, and she craves something more for herself. In her mind, her family and broader social norms present women with narrow paths to success and happiness.

Hailey, a 25-year-old heterosexual African American veteran player, explains that the Panthers have helped her think differently about success: "One thing that I also like is that most of the girls are doing something professionally, so they're ambitious too. They're either in school or they have like careers they—even motivates me more to do what I'm doing." Hailey's teammates provide examples of other ambitious women striving toward goals on and off the rugby pitch. Hailey is currently working and in school to further her education and to expand her professional options. She appreciates the Panthers and rugby as environments that encourage these pursuits, and she finds in her teammates' ambitions motivation for pursuing her own career and educational goals. The rugby community offers players like Hailey support for their ambitious pursuits and in their refusal to settle for the options patriarchal society presents. The project of breaking down barriers and imagining new possibilities permeates how players think and talk about their bodies.

*Rethinking Bodies*

Upon joining the rugby community, players gain access to an alternative language with which to describe their bodies. This language offers, on the one hand, an escape from dominant pressures with which women usually contend and, on the other, access to radical body positivity. Theresa explains,

It's all body types, which is one of the reasons I like it so much. Because you can be tall, you can be short, you can be fat, you can be thin, you can be fast, you can be slow, and you're still a valuable part of the team.

Theresa presents rugby's acceptance as remarkable as she listing all of the ways that a rugby body "can be." All of the players I interviewed echoed this sentiment, reciting how a rugby team requires all body types to be successful. This sense of openness fostered a sense among players that rugby had helped them feel more comfortable and confident in their bodies. A number of the players recognized joining a rugby team as one of the first times they were able to see their body size and shape as assets—not problems or failures.

As these women reject dominant ideals of beauty and femininity, they also court the stereotype of women rugby players as large and mannish. This idea may be stigmatizing in some contexts, but the players I interviewed were also excited by the opportunity to refuse to take on the burden of ordinary anxieties about women's bodies. Amidst this rebellious celebration, however, some players were quick to point out that they do not fit the stereotype of the mannish rugby player. Discussing men's strategies for hitting on her, Alex, a white bisexual 26-year-old rookie player, explains, "Like I get a lot of, um, this one does bother me, 'You can't play rugby, you're pretty' or, 'You don't look like a rugby player, you're really small.'" Though she outwardly rejects

characterizations of her body and features as small and pretty, her tone in the interview suggested she is also happy to receive this attention, to be praised for adhering to normative ideals of femininity. Alex attempts to reduce the power of dominant ideals of beauty and femininity, but she still takes pleasure in being praised as an exception to the large mannish stereotype. Rugby players gain bodily confidence and the ability to laugh at norms and stereotypes, but they are not unaffected by dominant standards. Rugby does not provide them a complete escape from social expectations, and the attention players receive affects their perceptions of themselves.

Ryan excitedly explained to me an experience at a rugby tournament that had a minimum weight for participants: players had to weight at least this amount for the tries scored to count.

It was this great feeling to be like, “Yeah I’m heavy enough!” instead of the opposite, which is like everything else—which is just like, “Are you light enough? Are you thin enough? Are you skinny enough?” And it’s like, “I’m fucking heavy enough! Yeah!”

This liberating experience becomes complicated when Ryan mentions some men spectators yelled, “too skinny!” in an attempt to get the points she scored erased: “And the fact that they even thought that I looked that I was skinny enough, or too skinny to be scoring I was like, ‘Awww, this is good.’” Ryan is, on the one hand, excited to have access to a social world where their body type is celebrated and, on the other hand, quick to mention that they are not the heaviest; they sit on the cusp of the minimum weight requirements. Ryan takes pleasure in being perceived simultaneously as “too skinny” and

as “heavy enough.” Their pleasure in the seemingly impossible coinciding of these two feelings is palpable. Rugby presents a radical vision for their body—a vision players insist is not echoed elsewhere in their lives. However, this alternative conceptualization is tempered by the power of dominant beauty ideals and standards of femininity. Players never fully escape troubling social norms governing women’s bodies.

### **Sexual Possibility**

#### *Queerness*

Rugby’s reputation as a queer site—embracing queerness as a sexuality and as an approach to life—encourages players to expect the team will provide them with a queer community upon their arrival. Rachel, a 25-year-old pansexual Jewish rookie player, exclaims, “Before I even joined the rugby team all I heard was, ‘There’s a lot of gay people on the women’s team. They’re all gay. They’re all lesbians.’ And I’m like ‘Fine by me!’” Rachel was excited she was to join a community whose members have a reputation for being queer.

As Rachel’s comment also suggests, the sexuality of rugby players is one of the main concerns of people outside the community. Ryan attempts to explain why the rugby community is characterized by queerness:

One of the most important things about rugby for me especially in college is that rugby is a safe space for people to explore their sexuality as much as anything else...A lot of queer women tend to gravitate towards it. First of all it’s a, it’s the most rough and tumble sport you can get, for women especially... so a lot of women like myself, queer women particularly, masculine of center people

particularly, who have never found an outlet... suddenly it's a place where you can be both proudly a woman and still physical.

Ryan attributes the appeal of rugby to not only its reputation for queerness, but also the excitement of aggression and physicality. Rugby's exceptional reputation draws athletes who desire a queer community and a place to explore their own sexualities.

Once they have joined the Panthers, players find the team calls them into broader conversations about queerness. Theresa compares discussions among rugby players to those allowed in mainstream society, "I feel like we have a lot more conversations about sexual identity, sexual representation in terms of physical appearance because of the wide spectrum of people and how people look in the rugby team." Theresa identifies the diverse gender and sexual presentations of her teammates as a motivating factor for discussions on the team. According to participants, these kinds of conversations happen more frequently and are more nuanced than those that occur elsewhere. Players' physical presentations and openness around topics generally considered taboo seem both to facilitate and to demand that these discussions take place.

Ryan elaborates on this notion, listing questions their rugby teammates ask:

'Like how does it work with girls?' You know? ... And like, 'How do you define your like visual presentation? Like, what does butch mean? What does femme mean? Is there something in between? Is there something that's not in that dichotomy?' And this kind of stuff, and I've had really cool conversations where I've explained the spectrum of gender and the spectrum of sexuality and, like, how sex works and all the various plethora of ways that sex works.

Ryan reminisces about all of the "really cool conversations" about gender and sexuality they have had with rugby players. The team brings together people who are curious about

sexuality and people who, like Ryan, consider themselves knowledgeable on the topics. The rugby team is a site of learning and sharing valued information.

I asked players to define their sexuality, and their answers reflected the insight that comes with such ongoing learning. For example, Summer explained the process of defining her sexuality:

I always settle back down on bisexual, yeah, cus it seems...maybe all-encompassing. I don't know. I started reading about pansexuality. I don't know...I read this one definition of bisexuality, and, like, I agree with that. It's like, I like—actually the one I read said both genders, so I would say all genders—not necessarily to the same degree and not necessarily at the same time. Anyway yeah, that's how I define it.

The practices of seeking out information and amending accepted definitions highlight how much Summer values these discussions. The players have had to work at understanding their sexuality, and they attribute those understandings at least in part to conversations and experiences within rugby culture. Amber, who identifies as gay, mused, “It'd be interesting if I'd never played rugby if I would have just stayed a homophobe forever.” Amber's joking remark suggests just how important the community has been to the development of her sexuality and identity. Players like Amber locate rugby as a catalyst in forging understandings of not only their individual sexualities, but also queerness.

Understanding takes many forms. Casey refused to define her sexuality during the interview. In most social contexts, not defining your sexuality is understood to be a failure. Not knowing also seems to run counter to how these players live their lives: they

are confident, they are loud, they are proud. And yet Casey stumbles as she responds to my question about her sexuality:

I don't know, it's like hard. I don't know. I mostly date men is it. I don't really know past that...And it's good but also very confusing and difficult. Yeah I don't know. I typically date men, but who knows?

Casey states that her sexuality is “confusing and difficult,” and she struggles to articulate what she means. Most social spaces demand an answer to this question—and it is generally a one-word answer. Even though she “typically date[s] men,” Casey refuses to limit herself and her sexuality by using the label heterosexual. In doing so, she rejects—however hesitantly—the importance of this label as a framework for understanding and sorting people.

Rugby culture not only makes players work with questions of gender and sexuality, it also forces others—those with connections to rugby players—to grapple with these ideas. Amber recalls her mother's reaction to seeing her play for the first time: “She was like, ‘I don't think I want you to play rugby anymore because it brings out manly habits in you.’ But since then she's come around.” Amber's rugby participation forced her mother to contend with and eventually accept her daughter's behavior, despite its failure to adhere to traditionally hegemonic feminine ideals.

Players find pleasure in making people feel uncomfortable and questioning their assumptions. Casey, a teacher, embraces her capacity to elicit this ambivalence and

discomfort in others. She reflects on her students' struggles in their attempts to categorize her:

I dress like I'm always in the outdoors, and, and they have literally no idea. And my hair's really short, and sometimes it's really long and they just don't really know... They, like, literally have no idea, and I like that, more of that ambiguity like, so that they don't just automatically assume based on how people look.

Casey is excited to challenge her students. She sees herself as not only a teacher of her subject, but also as an introduction to queerness. She uses her body and presence to encourage students to abandon the impulse to make assumptions. Rugby welcomes those who are aggressively queer and encourages them to understand their sexuality as residing happily and productively outside normative heterosexual frameworks.

### *Touch*

Players regularly explore queerness also through touch—an element of the game that establishes rugby as different from other sports and rugby players as unlike other athletes. Touch *during* the game allows players to bond; touch *after* the game builds upon this intimacy and sexual tension. During the game, players' bodies engage in a language of touch that allows them to physically bond over a common goal. A successful tackle requires players to wrap their arms around their opponent's thighs, squeezing tightly to force this other player to the ground. Players bind on to their teammates in rucks and scrums, grabbing hips, sports bras, and quads to facilitate movement of their bodies as one collective unit. The tighter the fit between two players, the more powerful and effective the drive in the scrum.

Summer comments on the nature of touch during the game:

It's way more physical, not just a tough sport, but, like, you touch each other way more than you do in a lot of other sports. And so, like, there's times where you're going to be grabbing boobs and you're grabbing crotch and your face is going to be in somebody else's space or somewhere else.

Summer's evocation of "physical" means not only that the sport is full contact, but also that the players touch intimate parts of other players' bodies: they grab crotch. Summer identifies touch as an integral part of a rugby game, more so than other contact sports—more frequent and different in nature, almost sexual.

Intimate touch happens in the game, in the scrum, and in the social gatherings that happen after each game—what players call "the social." In the game, players put their hands and heads on specified places on teammates' bodies with the shared purpose of defeating the other team. In the scrum, a shared goal and collective purpose guides the touch. That mentality allows players to escape their own bodies momentarily and to become part of the collective body of the scrum to accomplish a specific goal. In the social, these rules are relaxed. When the rugby game ends, the clear objective disappears. Personal feelings about teammates are welcome, alcohol is introduced, touching means something else, and multiple intentions are possible.

Anna comments on the nature of touch off of the rugby pitch, at the social:

"Teammates are really drunk and really comfortable and close to each other... We're all drunk and grabbing each other's butts and motor-boating like 'I love you!' You know, like all that fun stuff." This scene is only fathomable to players once bonds have been

established in the game. The touch that occurred during the game takes on a more explicitly sexual nature at the social. “All that fun stuff” for Anna and other players is their ability to touch other queer women. They get to hold butts, stick their heads between women’s breasts, and otherwise “grab crotch.” This touch is not possible outside of the team and outside of this community, and they relish the possibilities rugby proffers. Ryan’s declaration is typical: “Everyone on my team is so sexy I could cry. Oh god...they all are just, ohhhh, hot women athletes.” The rugby community provides Ryan and other players with sexy athletic queer women they can touch, and they almost cannot get over their good fortune.

## **Conflicts**

### *Identity*

While rugby culture is marked by sexual promise, some troubling undercurrents characterize its promise of liberation. For example, players embrace queerness, but that queerness should look and be practiced in particular ways. Though players represented the rugby team as a place in which they could explore their sexuality without the burden of labels and prescriptions, this ideal is not always achieved. Alex, for example, begins with a description of the team’s idealized sexual openness but soon veers into more cautious talk about a sexually prescriptive culture:

One thing I do like about this team is that it doesn’t feel like there is this need to identify as gay like there are some rugby teams...where if you hook up with women you should identify as gay um and that anything outside of that is you

denying your sexuality... but there have definitely been times on this team even where I've gotten, where people have been like "You're interested in men? I don't believe you."

Alex initially presents the Panthers as unlike other rugby teams who make players identify as gay. She then contradicts herself as she recalls negative responses from her teammates to her bisexuality. Players police each other's sexuality, and, in Alex's case, they question the validity of people's identities.

The assumption of a single way to be queer undermines the liberatory potential of the team's sexual culture. As I discussed earlier, players' descriptions of their sexuality in the interview suggest introspection. Such thoughtfulness gets lost among the louder and more audacious voices of this community. Players describe a pressure to identify among their teammates in a certain way and to explore their sexualities with certain people—that is, with their teammates.

Players who do not identify as queer are assumed to be unaware or in denial. In the interviews and in rugby culture, the trope of the "confused straight girl" frequently emerges. The confused straight girl is a straight-identified woman who joins a rugby team and eventually, to no one's surprise, decides she is not straight. Most of the Panthers players shared a story about a teammate who fit into this narrative, and some used themselves as examples. For example, Amber describes her experience joining her first rugby team in college:

They took bets when—they always take bets every year on the rookies to see who is gay and who is not...And I was like—they unanimously voted that I was gay

and I was like, “I’m not. I’m not gay”...six months later...I mean they took bets not while the rookies were there. I was told after I came out that that had happened. I mean, they did say that I was gay several times. It was just funny.

Amber laughs and claims the experience was funny. The account is vaguely sinister, nonetheless. The team felt ownership over players’ sexualities; veteran players asserted they know the rookies’ sexualities better than the rookies themselves. Every year, in private meetings, veteran players discuss the sexuality of the rookies and take a vote. Though queer sexual behaviors are welcome, a decidedly *unqueer* all-knowing coercion seems to pervade rugby culture.

Amber is not the only participant who classified her former rugby self under the “confused straight girl” label. Players’ comments in our interviews suggest rugby teams expect straight women to become queer women; they also expect veteran players to police the inevitable progression. Anna expands on this:

If straight people start acting not-straight, then people start raising an eyebrow going “hmmm our straight girl’s a little loose tonight, huh?” Like, “Okay. What is she up to?” You know, and like everyone knows, and it’s like it’s a joke, and it’s funny, and everyone will pick on you for it if you have proclaimed yourself to be straight and all of a sudden acted very gay. The entire team will call you out on it, be like “Oh, what’s up straight gay girl? How was your night last night?” You know, like, we don’t let anything slide.

Anna laughs as she explains rugby women’s refusal to abide sexual behavior that seems to contradict professed identities. Her comments suggest the limits to the queerness celebrated in many interviews. The team assumes that many players who identify as straight will not retain that identity once they are exposed to the exceptional queerness that is women’s rugby. This patronizing idea and the subsequent label of “confused

straight girl” likely deter some players from exploring sexual possibilities, claiming sexual experiences, and asserting their identities. Kaitlin remarks, “We’re here to play a sport, and if some people happen to be gay, who cares? If some people have to be straight, who cares?” There is a sadness in this attempted progressive declaration; the difference between “happen to be gay” and “have to be straight” is stark. Kaitlin defends herself against the notion of queerness as inevitable and rejects an assumption that her sexuality has been at all impacted by her participation on the Panthers team. Rugby’s potential as a queer site is limited through the monitoring of players’ sexualities and the rejection of those that do not conform to rigid understandings of queerness.

### *Violent and Coercive Touch*

Touch on the rugby team appears similarly less liberatory than many people claim in interviews. As oppressive and frustrating boundaries are dismantled, more beneficial boundaries seem to be removed as well. Rugby is an aggressive sport, and sometimes players take advantage of this. Amber remembers when she found out that her college girlfriend had cheated on her with a teammate. Amber punished the teammate: “I just dump tackled the shit out of her, like, at least four times, and the whole team knew what was happening, so they just like stopped and watched.” Her college team’s tacit approval of her behavior is striking. So too is Amber’s concluding thought about the incident: “She never came back to practice. [Laughs] It was less extreme because she wasn’t as dedicated to rugby, obviously, if she didn’t come back to practice.” For Amber, commitment to rugby and to the team is demonstrated through a tolerance of violent

harassment. If the offending teammate really cared about rugby, she would have returned after being violently dump tackled. By not returning, the teammate indicated she was not committed to the team and therefore, it seems, an appropriate target of violence. The decision to quit reflects on the woman's dedication to rugby, not Amber's violence on the pitch. The teammate was not meant to be a rugby player: she was neither tough nor dedicated enough.

In order to be members of this community, players must waive their ability to object to not only violence at games and practices, but also coercive touch at socials. Once the bodies leave the rugby pitch, they return to a social space and continued touching becomes more confusing. Anna muses,

Um, it happens, um, sometimes against your will, but not like in a bad way against your will...so I'm just going to go with it cus if you're really that uncomfortable, I mean you probably would actually have gotten up and walked away...Some people, like, are unsure how to act when people start getting all touchy feely when they're drunk. Some people just watch and are just like, "What is going on?" And other people are like, "Tight! Participation!" And they all jump in. Other people just don't care, like me.

According to Anna, touch sometimes happens against players' wills. However, she maintains that this is, "not like in a bad way against your will." Touch can happen against your will—but not in a bad way? A tolerance for a hypersexualized environment is necessary to be a member of this team. Members have to either participate in the potentially coercive touch or maintain that they do not care—these are bleak options. The varied reactions to the sexualized atmosphere maintain touch as an integral part of the

culture. Players are allowed to be confused, but they also have to tolerate suggestive language and aggressive touching.

Playing on this team means people are implicitly consenting to being tackled and potentially getting injured. If players surrender their ability to consent to being touched and tackled on the pitch, do they also give up their ability to consent off of the pitch?

Kaitlin remarks about touch during socials, “Like if I was uncomfortable, then I shouldn’t be playing with this team and probably not play rugby.” Players like Kaitlin consent to specific touch on the pitch, and this implies consent to other kinds of touch off of the pitch. Rugby allows players to have access to possibilities and narratives of themselves as exceptional, but this access is granted on the condition Kaitlin and other players tolerate a level of misogynistic violence and a hypersexual, potentially coercive, atmosphere. This tradeoff constrains any sense of liberation that players gain through their rugby participation.

## **Conclusion**

Women’s rugby provides players with bodily and sexual possibilities. They work hard on and off the pitch and make sacrifices to preserve rugby as separate from mainstream culture. The resulting community challenges convention, represents opportunity, and supports players in ambitious pursuits. As players exhibit strength and touch other women on and off the pitch, they gain access to a different way of thinking about and experiencing their own and others’ bodies, their sexual desires, and sexuality in

general. However, as this site challenges the usual barriers, new norms emerges and misogyny—a familiar presence outside rugby—persists. Queerness is privileged over other sexualities, and sexual behavior is often coercive as consent is unclear.

In my interviews, I asked players if they considered rugby feminist, and most said, half-heartedly, sure, we are strong women engaged in what most consider men's play. We are not afraid to be strong or queer, and we accept and celebrate behavior among women that most would find objectionable. But the question seemed to bore them. When I asked Amber about feminism, she responded, "I don't have any feelings on it." She and other players described not knowing enough about feminist issues and causes and not feeling especially motivated to learn more. Amber and her Panther teammates seemed bored with what they did know of mainstream feminisms' promises.

In *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, Ariel Levy condemns such boredom and rejects any liberation women might find in the raunch of a community like rugby. According to Levy, what these women need is a revamping of the gender order (Levy, 2006). And of course she is right. However, this vision requires patience and faith of women engaged in the present. Panthers players are highly educated and socially conscious; they are also deeply unsatisfied with the world's offerings and choose to make sacrifices and tolerate hypersexuality in order to create a community where they can work together with other unsatisfied women to imagine different possibilities. Rugby is a meaningful but limited response to the struggle of being an educated queer millennial woman, and women's

rugby is but one example of women who are dissatisfied with social promises and trying to create something else.

In the analysis of Panthers players, I attempted to reach further than the binary discussions that have characterized previous scholarship on women's rugby. I worked to address a question beyond whether rugby is a culture of actual liberation or mere conservative reproduction of violence and misogyny. The violence and misogyny that regulate players' engagement did prove to be a challenge for me. I wanted to defend this team and the culture and at the same time I wanted to wholly denounce them. My own intense ambivalence informed my analysis and subsequent conclusions.

Ultimately, I find myself returning to Sara Ahmed's notion of the feminist killjoy—a troublemaker who makes trouble by drawing attention to trouble that already existed (Ahmed, 2010). Women rugby players are already troublemakers in the most basic sense of the word. They are loud, drunk, and aggressive both physically and sexually. And they are troublemakers as they move through the broader world—refusing to adhere to their assigned gendered and sexual roles. But perhaps rugby players also make trouble for feminist movements in demanding more from them. Rugby calls on feminism to make room for misbehavior, for the ridiculous and pleasurable. Implicitly but insistently, rugby also calls on feminism to recognize that it may not (yet) be enough. Ahmed asserts, “Laughing about sexism can be a rebellious act; making sexism laughable can be a way of not being undone” (Ahmed, 2015, p. 13). Someone who's been undone would be so overwhelmed and exhausted by sexism that they lose a sense of themselves,

and the undoing of educated, socially conscious women is a persistent threat. As women navigate dominant, everyday social institutions and expectations, they collect a weighty archive of sexist moments. Constant engagement with this violence is exhausting, and surrender is an understandable reaction.

Rugby is one strategy for not being undone, for not giving in to the weight of daily living. Their community, though limited, also offers possibilities for creation and embodiment? Rugby women invest in this sport and community because the engagement allows them to imagine other possibilities. Their play on and off the pitch is not merely ignorant or unproductive. Refusing to wholly engage with mainstream society preserve a sense of pleasure and desire too often lost or diluted. Rugby is a way for players to be done, to be satisfied with their engagement in the world and to embody pleasure, queerness, and success.

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