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Win It!:

An Analysis of Women in Female Homosocial Environments In Athletic Films

Sports films depicting women in competitive homosocial environments, such as *Bend It Like Beckham* by director Gurinder Chadha; *Whip It*, directed by Drew Barrymore; and *Ice Princess* directed by Tim Fywell, offer a problematic difference in focus from male athletic films. Unlike their male counterparts, female protagonists face plots with little correlation with the sport itself; rather, their films focus on the social expectations of traditional feminine behavior, such as lack of control in their athletic and social lives, conformity to traditional feminine identity, and punishment for deviation from being "real" heterosexual women. To further undermine the female athlete, presentations of femininity are often directly correlated to a final victory. In *Whip It*, when Bliss (Ellen Page) embraces her identity apart from stereotypical femininity, the final game is lost, as if to punish the deviation. In *Bend It Like Beckham*, Jess (Parminda Nagra) is effectively controlled by patriarchy and tradition when she is permitted to pursue her goal of becoming a professional athlete. In *Ice Princess*, the journey toward supposed victory is demonstrated by Casey Carlyle's (Michelle Trachtenberg) transformation from a Plain Jane into a fully sexualized, traditionally feminine woman. Comparatively, male homosocial environments focus on overcoming physically stronger adversaries and are less driven by societal gender performance expectations. Consequently, this audience expectation lends itself to distraction from athletics within female homosocial sports films. Films become focused with women presenting as masculine and forget that athletic aspiration should be the main focus.

These films do not appropriately represent the impressive, often masculine, women who dominate their physical careers. In turn, cinema denies the inspirational authentic feminist identities that have the potential to inspire young women to break the binary and pursue a career in sports. Therefore, it is the purpose of this project to complicate these problematic depictions and create a change so that future cinematic representations of female athletes succeed in inspiring women to become active participants in sports without stereotypes and stigmas hampering their progress.

Discussion With the Queerest of Scholars Halberstam and Butler

Jack Halberstam and Judith Butler are leading researchers in both feminist and queer scholarship. By applying their research focusing on the function of gender within society, a deeper understanding of the depiction of females in sports is uncovered. Their critiques of social construction and gender performance help to navigate the complex struggles that female athletes face, to conform to gender normalcy. By applying these scholars research on the function of gender, the quieting of feminist voices within sports films becomes offensively apparent. Using feminist and queer scholarship, I have been able to build on their ideas to define social construction as the perceptions and societally approved conformity that allows for individuals to be accepted and operate within the spectrum of an agreed upon reality. This definition is essential for making critiques of the films that attempt to reinforce societal normalcy, which forces woman into an antiquated role of traditional female behavior.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* problematizes the role of social construction in feminism and the implications involved with allowing a male-dominated society to define (construct)

appropriate female behavior. Socially constructed gender performativity only serves as a constraint to set apart those who do not identify within traditional binary. Butler makes a critique on feminism calling it "a product of a society without representation enough to allow for true feminism"(*Gender Trouble* 11). She talks about an inner core that is not bound by gender. To elaborate, she states that there is a function of humanity itself completely separate from gender. Only by the influence of society built constructs do we submit to perform exclusively in gender specific terms. Through this realization of a pre-existing "core" the function of gender becomes irrelevant when separated from social construction. It becomes impossible to rationalize expectations of gender performance that does not rely on self-defined identity.

J. Jack Halberstam's critical work *Female Masculinity* makes an insightful analysis of cinema and the way it presents women. "Tomboyism" is a term used in Halberstam's book, which introduces a definition for women who present themselves physically in a traditionally masculine way. This term takes into consideration the physical presentations of a female. Athletic women are often referred to as masculine in a negative way, but this creates a connection to masculinity as being a bad thing. Many women who participate in sports present with muscles, are confident, driven, determined, and potentially aggressive. This sort of terminology is contradictory to the terms that are used to define the traditional female, submissive, quiet, and nice. Halberstam creates an example of a woman in film who depicts masculinity better than a man by using one of cinemas most notorious emblems of manliness, 007 himself, James Bond, "In *Goldeneye* it is M who most convincingly performs masculinity, and she does so partly by exposing the sham of Bond's own performance. It is M who convinces us that sexism and misogyny are not necessarily part and parcel of masculinity, even though

historically it has become difficult, if not impossible, to untangle masculinity from the oppression of women"(4). Through this example, Halberstam is able to separate the masculinity from the man, by applying it to a powerful, masculine authority figure such as M, and not the irresistibly misogynist Bond. By using the notion of the positive and powerful tomboy, one can draw attention to the responsibility of filmmakers to depict masculine women on the screen to showcase their influential authority and achievement rather than simply relying exclusively on men to do it.

Females Breaking the Binary

Historically, women have either been excluded from athletics or represented as having less ability than men. Women are often relegated to the sidelines, due to a single difference of a chromosome. When women do participate, despite realistically performing at the same level or even higher than men, they are depicted in film with negative stereotypes which reinforce societal boundaries that keep females trapped in a time capsule of appropriate feminine behavior. The correlation between womanhood and presenting in a feminine way has been deeply rooted in Westernized society and is a source of frustration for gender fluid youth and adults. Women with high capability who break the binary by participating in a male dominated activities are Othered due to their lack of gender conformity. Instead of being celebrated for their athletic ability and authenticity, women are critiqued to the point that the focus of most films forgets athleticism entirely, instead attacking their lack of traditional feminine behavior. In essence, it does not matter if a young woman excels at sports, she must also excel at being a girl before she is allowed to win.

Social construction plays a vital role in determining the qualification for girls to become women as well as accepted members of appropriate society. Societal inclusion based on gender specific appropriate behavior is reinforced by films that include athletic tomboys being depicted as outcasts until they are transformed into traditionally feminine women who concede to the rules created by social construction. Judith Butler investigates the boundaries of social construction theorizing that gender is an attribute to an individual:

> The metaphysics of substance, and how does it inform thinking about the categories of sex?...A humanist feminist position might understand gender as an attribute of a person who is characterized essentially as a pre-gendered substance or "core", called the person, denoting a universal capacity for reason, moral deliberation, or language...This relation or contextual point of view suggests that what the person "is," and indeed, what gender "is," is always relative to the constructed relations in which it is determined" (Butler 14).

Society works to steer the tomboy away from attributes that may come from that pre-existing core independence of sex. It is fascinating to understand the possibility of traits that are not qualifications of a gender assignment. If society builds the boundaries stipulated by gender conformity, then it becomes the responsibility of society as a whole to consider the potential harm that repressing certain inclinations can cause. Women and men have the potential to perform at the same competitive athletic level if allowed to forget the performative aspect of gender. The insight that "gender identity" is in relation to "societal construction" and not the other way around is profoundly freeing. It lends to the idea that society can be reconstructed without the frame of a dominantly patriarchal order, in which women must be subservient in order to reinforce cultural celebrations of traditions that see men as constantly superior.

Lesbian Panic: A Troubled Audience

One of the main points I will examine in the pages that follow, is the notion of women who participate in sports are as masculine and, therefore, lesbian. There is an inherent association tying the athletic female to queer culture. When women are presented as athletic beings in film, it often becomes necessary to turn the individual's association with athletics into a campy comedy surrounding the hilarity of their gender confusion on the road to heteronormativity. There is a fetishizing that transforms what should be a film based on talent and determination entailing a journey toward failure or success, into inauthentic representations of women in sports. Gender of any spectrum should be an irrelevant factor in the composition of an athletic film. A woman's participation and dominating in an athletic environment is almost exclusively tied to gender conformity complications, which only serves to placate the needs of an audience that would not support the film without a reinforcement of traditional displays of female behavior. Both Judith Butler and J. Jack Halberstam elaborate on the concept of the true meaning of gender trouble. While analyzing a queer cover on a photoshoot Halberstam states, "the ample possibilities offered by spectatorship make concepts such as lesbian images, and hence lesbian art or lesbian cinema, harder and harder to define" (Halberstam 177). Ironically, the audience being considered during the construction of athletic films is not a feminist one, nor are they a queer one. They are made for those who would prefer gender be constrained into the confining binary that forces a categorization of either men or women. Masculine or feminine. Blue or pink. A woman who presents as masculine is required by the audience to find a way back to traditional feminine behavior in order to succeed as an athlete and as a woman. Presentations

of dominant masculinity in women signifies a deviance from traditional gender performance and leads to a lesbian panic within the audience, regardless of the character's actual orientation. The audience roots for the "lost girl" to find her way back to social and gender normalcy. These films need to recognize a newer, more informed audience: one with the capacity to appreciate a film focused exclusively on obtaining athletic achievements without regard for gender performance.

Social Constructs of Femininity and Feminism

Sports films depiction of women focus on realizing the deviance of an individual from traditional gender roles. These films are dedicated to rewarding conformity to a socially constructed notion of femininity. Through use of the happy ending, which is exclusively obtainable for the woman who bend to tradition and conforms to societal pressures, a reaffirmation of problematic stereotypes is perpetuated. These films begin with a female presenting as what J. Jack Halberstam describes as "tomboyism"(*Female Masculinity* 5). The Tomboy is the girl who does not fit into the barbie doll standard set by societal expectations for women. Instead, she often presents without makeup, a dress, or long hair. If, and only if, along the journey (which includes a pretense of a storyline involving a dream of athleticism) the female athlete aligns her athletic desire with an equal motivation to achieve stereotypical representation of femininity does she triumph at her sport.

Women's traditional gender roles in society are apparent with every pink nursery and frilly dress that is made for sitting still, not running, kicking and/or throwing. There is a socially constructed assumption that men and women's roles are much like the clothing sections in shopping malls. There are always very clearly marked signs that direct the individual to the

section where they may find the clothing that aligns with their biological gender. Men are to go to the jeans,t-shirts, flannel, and ultimately, dark colored clothing. Comparatively, women are directed to part of the store with bright floral colors, dresses, and skirts. There is very clearly no sports equipment or themed clothing to be found in the girls' section. Even when a women does find herself in the athletic deparment of a store, the women's section is designed with pink helmets, skorts, and yoga gear. Queer scholars[1] agree that this compulsion to categorize is problematic on many different levels particularly in connection with gender binary. Forcing individuals who do not conform to the traditional binary to pick between man or woman, is a lot like trying to fit a square peg through a round hole, ineffective, frustrating, and ultimately unrealistic.

It becomes essential to separate female behavior from traditional stereotypes and realize that gender performance is a paradigm enforced by social construction. On a cultural level, it has been historically and societally appropriate to view only two possible identities: male and female. Queer scholars, such as Butler, attempt to overthrow social construction and challenge the "normal" perceptions of gender identity, "it would be wrong to think that the discussion of "identity" ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that "persons" only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (*Gender Trouble* 22). Butler's assertion of gender conformity relies on first recognizing and observing the "standards of intelligibility" which suggests that gender performance hinges on the individual recognition of their biological gender and the constructs which define it. Conformity of gender then can only play a role in a recognition of a

[1] Judith Butler and J. Jack Halberstam

set standard created by societal construction. Deviation from stereotypical female identity is an achievement of breaking out of the traditional gender construction, one that does not recognize a binary.

21st century society is exhibiting the potential to merge these strict societal roles regarding gender and forget the restriction of the stereotypical gender binary. Judith Butler stresses the need to recognize the multidimensionality of gender identity when she writes: “The masculine/feminine binary constitutes not only the exclusive framework in which that specificity can be recognized, but in every other way the “specificity” of the feminine is once again fully decontextualized and separated off analytically and politically from the constitution of class, race, ethnicity, and other axes of power relations that both constitute “identity” and make the singular notion identity a misnomer” (6). A gray area exists where femininity is not an alternate to femaleness and masculinity is not the property of men is on the horizon. It is important to override the compulsion to force individuals into one of two gender categories when identity surpasses either term. In direct contrast to this progress, a majority of films, portray women in sports by focusing on reestablishing troubling gender specific identities, female oriented sports characters, rather than celebrating their skill as serious athletes.

No Gender Roles for Me, Thanks

Perceptions of women who participate in athletic culture often become static in that engaging in sports and exhibiting that masculinity (once reserved only for men) automatically makes them lesbian. J. Jack Halberstam points out the problems that arise when depicting non-traditional women in film, “but as even a cursory survey of popular cinema confirms, the

image of the tomboy can be tolerated only within a narrative of blossoming womanhood; within such a narrative tomboyism represents a resistance to adulthood itself rather than to adult femininity"(6). Films currently perform the job of empowering normalcy by allowing exclusionary audiences to pair comedy with untraditional manifestations of femininity in order to corrupt any progress toward equal displays of athletic ability.

A stunning contrast exists when comparing men's sports films to women, particularly in connection to homosocial bonding. A comparison reveals that, while men's films have their own gender performance standards held in place by societal expectations, the ultimate focus of their story is different. Men are expected to find a way to perform on their highest physical level and to unite with teammates in order to achieve a greater level of athletic performance. In contrast, women's homosocial environments are shown to be competitive in an entirely different way. Women are shown to possess conflicting desires between dedication to their sports and a potential romantic relationship that drives them toward traditional presentations of femininity and social acceptance. This desire becomes a point of contention between the main character and another teammate, or family, and works to dissolve relationships that have been built to improve the overall structure of the team as a united entity.

Women in homosocial environments are faced with two types of competition within the capacity of film, physical and psychological. On a social level women are forced to deal with the homosocial association where they must learn to function within the elements of what can be boiled down to a high school clique. Not only must women prove their skill on an athletic level, but also they must prove themselves by performing beyond expectations to establish themselves as a serious participant while navigating the mechanics of a female group. Before women are

shown collaborating to find a way to achieve their ultimate performance goal, they must find a way to function as a part of the female clique. The environment includes less emphasis on a physical competition, but it becomes competitive in an entirely different way.

When Women Win

Athletic women are masculine, and embody the positive qualities associated with the term. In *Female Masculinity*, author J. Jack Halberstam asserts that "masculinity is not maleness"(1). This supports the idea that “femininity is also not the exclusive property of women” (268). Many sports films contradict Judith Butler's notion that manifestations of gender and gender performance do not rely on the biology of the subject and should be based on individual choice (129). Young girls and adolescents should be exposed to films depicting women as powerful, athletic beings, capable of performing on the same, or even a higher level, than men because it is essential to differentiate women’s sports from beauty pageants. Films present female athletics so that vanity, stereotypes, and gender conformity dominate and ignore celebrations of universal sports themes. Athletics for women and men should be dedicated to displays of competition, teamwork, and determination; whereas, failing to recognize talent reflected through individual female performance will only result in society's inability to progress toward an equality-based perception of athletics.

Coming Out as a Female Athlete

While it is often the dream of many parents to see their sons become big sports stars, this desire is not as common for daughters. Persisting hegemonic structures have made it difficult for parents to imagine their daughter's in protective gear, aggressively sporting bruises or injuries. In the context of films showing women breaking into the world of sports, it often becomes a shock that they have even chosen a career path that relies primarily on physicality rather than intellect. Athletics is overrun with male participants, with very few, if any, women allowed to participate. History shows that sports has largely been a boys club. Only recently, with the advent of Title IX, has female participation in athletics become more mainstream. The expectation for women to become successful athletes is often not apparent when they are younger, and this is a problem that bleeds into negative depictions of female athletes in film. There is a pattern within films that depict women who seek an athletic career that involves them being unable to simply pursue that desire and explore that identity, but must be pre-qualified by a coming out scene. Often, athletic desire becomes a secret, that of which is comparable to a hidden sexual identity.

When the truth of their desire is uncovered, it is fraught with complications, and like sexual orientation outside the lines of social expectation, is treated as a punishable abnormality. Whether it be gender preference or gender performance preference, either deviation from the norm becomes a problem in the eyes of the parent. In athletic films, parental authority takes on a larger problematic role for women in sports than it does in a majority of men's films:

> "The body" appears as a passive medium on which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself… The body is figured as a mere instrument or medium for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related. But "the

> body"itself a construction, as are the myriad "bodies" that constitute the domain of gendered subjects. Bodies cannot be said to have a dignified existence prior to the mark of their gender. (Butler 12)

A passion or desire for sports becomes shameful within the films due to the "cultural meaning" attached to a female body. This leads the audience to the interpretation that participating in athletics is something that should be kept secret until what cinema creates as the dramatic unveiling. It is telling how closely traditional presentations of femininity are tied in with cultural expectation, as the stricken reaction of the families of women in these movies once they are "found out" becomes all too revealing. Identity is coordinated within the performativity of athletic women. Identity is explored in terms outside of the "domain of gendered subjects". As they move deeper into their passion for sports and begin to outwardly present themselves as dominant, masculine, and powerful figures, the less attached they become to their parents and society. This distance stems from a disappointment at the lack of conformity toward traditional presentations of female beauty.

Fear of the parent becomes a driving factor for the conflict that women athletes face within cinematic depictions. Social constructs make the notion of the traditionally masculine presenting women (often what is thought of as the butch lesbian regardless of sexual orientation) a terrifying deviation from the norm. Athleticism and masculinity go hand-in-hand which causes fear on the part of the parent for their daughter's future. This fear of not fitting and finding a place within society is the root of a thematic concept of parental rejection of athletic sense of Self. J.Jack Halberstam identifies the history importance of masculine women, "I think a present-day intuition about the construction of masculinity changes the way we think about the

record of latter-day female masculinities" (52). He begins to discuss the idea of "sexual constructivism" in relation to historically founded examples of women who present traditionally as masculine (53). The fear of the parent, I would argue, is tied to a more historical notion of social deviation that comes in the form the fear of masculine presentations in women. An athletic woman with muscles, competitive aggression, often fits within the tomboy dynamic. This "tomboyism" is what cinema uses to cause panic within the audience and the parents. One of the main plot points of female athletic films is questioning whether the women will find their way back to traditional presentations of femininity and make their parents, society, and the audience, proud, or will they embrace and embody the perceived deviant masculine identity. It is necessary for films to legitimize female masculinity without necessarily relegating them to what is not a self-identified category of lesbian. Society, including parents, must realize that, even if their daughter's assume a masculine identity, this categorization of her as such should not be viewed as negative.

The Dress or Death

Societal construction plays monumental role in dictating women's role in society. From determining the appropriate standards concerning the ways women should dress, behave, and live has been at one point almost exclusively set by society. While the role of women has relented in that we are now permitted to show our ankles in public, there are still societal expectations which prevent total progress where women are in complete control of themselves. Due to a long history of societal repression and stipulations dictating women's gender performativity, when a women does break the binary by means of becoming active in sports, it

should be something to celebrate, not condemn. Visual examples in film of women living the notion of refusing to submit to societal expectation is necessary to promote the continued progression of feminism. It becomes imperative that these depictions do not reinforce a patriarchal society, yet many currently do. Even films directed by women can establish male authority and create an unstable foundation for girls who want to break into a dominantly male environment, whether it be sports, science, math, or any other predominantly male fields. In film, the audience act as a stand in for society, which either accept or reject the way a female athlete is presenting themselves. It is essential that the audience either become enlightened and introduced to growing definitions of hegemonic[2] gender performativity. The role of performative femininity within films that depict female homosocial environments is complex and often act as a reinforcement of gender traditions. Female's breaking the binary deconstruct sexual constructs that determine how women should behave and look. Social construction and gender normalcy culminate to an audience that expects if a women must pursue a career in athletics that she also put on a dress. While this idea of putting on the dress is not always literal, it becomes figuratively symbolic for assuming the traditional presentations that signify a socially acceptable women. The uniform within sports becomes a point of controversy in connection to feminism and gender equality. In many sports the clothing for women offers less coverage than a man's.The uniform is an image that becomes controversial in a myriad of ways in women's sports. It becomes important to recognize the uniform as a tool for women to assert their authority. There is a persisting stereotype that women who dress in practically nothing are not

[2] "Hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" (Bell, 2008).

feminists while more conservative dressing signifies feminism, neither are true. J. Jack Halberstam presents the hypocrisy of inverting stereotypes within film by saying, “The opposite of the stereotypes long been thought of as “the positive image” and yet it may well be that positive images also deal in stereotypes and with far more disastrous effects. Furthermore, cinema of positive images is simply not a very interesting cinema” (184). It is essential to understand that even the “positive image” of a conservatively dressed women can be deceptively anti-feminist. It does not matter how little a women wears. If she elects to dress that way on the basis of her own authority, without regard for society or rules, then she has performed a feminist act.

The analysis of visual depictions of women’s clothing carries on from feminist uniforms to gender performativity, where women are nearly always forced to wear the dress. In film, athletic women are faced with conflict over cultural ideologies involving formal presentation of their appearance. Traditional presentations, according to societal construct demand that identity recognize gender as its authority and dictator. One should always dress in the attire that society tells them relates to their genetically determined gender. Judith Butler engages in an analysis of Monique Witting and helps to disrupt the reliance on a traditional binary to determine performativity:

> There is no reason to divide up human bodies into male and female sexes except that such a division suits the economic needs of heterosexuality and lends a naturalistic gloss to the institution of heterosexuality. Hence, for Wittig, there is no distinction between sex and gender; the category of “sex” is itself a gendered category, fully politically invested,

> naturalized but not natural… A lesbian transcends the binary opposition between woman and man. (153)

A fear emerges that the protagonists of women's sports film's will disregard patriarchal culture and social construction, taking authority and feminist power by visually presenting as traditionally masculine. In an exploration of Witting's argument, Judith Butler recognizes this lesbian panic as a fear of disregarding the "institution of heterosexuality" and cultural values. This "institution" is one that demands that there be no "distinction between sex and gender". Witting claims that "sex" has become "unnaturally naturalized". Social constructs have created a functioning patriarchal society where it becomes appropriate for the audience to fear the masculine women (often regardless of sexual orientation, is viewed as a lesbian) who refuse to recognize the constructs and rules, which are only reinforced by gender inequality. The initiation of this fear ignites as women who partake in athletics do not perform in relation to their gender, or alternately, disregard appropriate female behavior. Part of this fear begins as these assorted films portray women as initially under performing in the traditional role of feminine or presenting as overtly, usually concerningly, masculine.

The Dynamics of the Female Homosocial High School Clique

Competition and competitiveness go hand-in-hand in sports, but within the complex female homosocial environment, these terms are redefined. Women must navigate a number of social intricacies that have little to nothing to do with the sport. Film's featuring a dominantly female environment favor the drama aspect, playing on the clique aspect of breaking into a new culture. Women are placed in a position where they must find a way to be accepted into an

athletic identity that takes them seriously as competitors, while balancing the drama and cliches that comes with a stereotyped girl drama. Partly to keep the audience ensnared with the traditional high school drama of a female hierarchy that a female must break into in order to establish acceptance into the group, films include what can be described as pointless mini-dramas that function as distractions from the actual desire and participation in a sport. In place of physical athletic ability, competition focuses on traditional presentations of beauty, relationships, and the ability to navigate a traditionally female homosocial structure successfully.

The dynamics of many of the female homosocial environment shown in cinema culminate to what can either be a storm of shallow competition, which has little to no correlation with achieving athletic goals, or a team of women supporting one another regardless of traditional conformity. Halberstam initiates a conversation about masculine identity which can be applied to the culture of an all female environment:

> The development of a new sexual vocabulary and a radical sexual discourse is happening already in transgender communities, in sexual subcultures, in clubs, in zines, in queer spaces everywhere. Female masculinity within queer sexual discourse allows for the disruption of even flows between gender and anatomy, sexuality and identity, sexual practice and performativity. (139)

This new "sexual vocabulary and discourse" help to create an interesting group dynamic in the context of these films. While the idea and discussion of expansion of perspective in connection to gender identity is becoming more pronounced in society, within film, traditional cliched environments persist. If a female presents as masculine, then she is forced on the outside of a group. The dynamic of "sexual practice and performativity" evolve according to the rules within

any homosocial environment that a protagonist becomes involved in. The uninformed audience is accustomed to subplots in women's athletic films that involve distractions from participation in the sport itself. These distractions include the group changing or altering a woman in order to push her toward traditional female behavior. This serves the societal construction by denying "tomboyism" and reinforces cultural traditions of "proper" or "normal" gender performativity.

A major part of succeeding in the competitive world of sports is growing independently in order to perform at an athlete's highest capability while also becoming a functioning member of an athletic team. Many of the films depict a problematic representation of female competition, which loses focus on sports and becomes entangled with the mini-drama of romantic and family relationship dynamics. Using Judith Butler's research, it becomes understood that the function of the clique stems from a stereotypical reinforcement of highly politicized views of gender performativity:

> The rough sketch of gender gives us a clue to understanding the political reasons for the substantialization view of gender. The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire. The act of differentiating the two oppositional moments of the binary results in a consolidation of each term, the respective internal coherence of sex, gender, and desire. (31)

The construction of films that associate themselves with female athleticism yield to the binary through keeping true to traditional relationships not only in romantic entanglements, but, also in group dynamics. Films show cliched versions of a high school reality that work to reinforce these

"politically" built social structures. The peer group that women engage in becomes a tool or device in order to direct the main character toward traditional presentations that work within the "traditional" binary. The use of a "naturalized and compulsory" framework makes the uninformed audience not only okay with fall back representations of inauthentic athletic relationships, but desire them. Often, films lose interest in the athletic ability of the protagonist and become more interested in the subplot involving cliched interactions with predictable outcomes involving the tedious journey fraught with offensive transformations from "not to hot". The loss of focus on the engagement with the sport helps to reinforce traditional gender roles because the audience is given scenes that take away from women presented as powerful, masculine, and physically strong adversaries. These scenes are comprised of girl fights, make-overs, and normative heterosexual relationships, which help reinforce traditional forms of behavior all of which occur outside the field, court, or ring.

The Current Problem with Cinematic Representations of Athletic Women in Films

There are many films, both men and women's, which depict problematic homosocial athletic environments. Problematic gender expectations, presentations, performativity, and transgressional deviations from traditional roles in society can be found littered within the cinematic universe. Social construction and the audience demand that films follow a specific structure. Unfortunately, that outline reinforces the traditional binary without lending itself to breaking away from the conformity that is audience expectations. The films that are examined within this research present themselves as feminist athletic films and are geared toward portraying women participating in sports and homosocial female environments. Consequently,

they fail on many levels to do anything other than enforce traditional gender roles, legitimize anti-feminist attitudes cloaked in the disguise of flippant drama, and create a new standard of patriarchal superiority for generations of women.

Bend It Like Beckham by director Gurinder Chadha follows an aspiring soccer player Jess as she attempts to break away from the traditional life that seems intent on consuming her. Endowed with an alternative identity, it becomes obvious that Jess is more interested in "bending it like Beckham" than she is with learning how to cook traditional dinners. Jess is scouted for a women's soccer team by Jules, the team Captain who becomes her best friend. While her sister, Pinky, focuses on marrying her fiance with the approval of both her own family and his, Jess dedicates herself to athletics and breaking away from the confines of living a traditional life. In the process of chasing her dream, she becomes entangled in the seemingly inevitable drama created in order to steer her toward traditional presentations of femininity. Instead of Jess's dedication and passion for soccer being highlighted, the film veers into the tedious wilderness of relationship debacles, conforming to gender roles, and ultimately rejecting of a could-be adult masculine identity.

Whip It, directed by Drew Barrymore, becomes the cinematic depiction of female homosocial environments with the greatest potential for influencing positive perceptions of women in athletic roles. The film focuses on Bliss, a girl whose mother expects her to become a pageant winner. Bliss finds herself in a world filled with traditionally feminine girls who are prepared to enter into society as women. Unable to conform to the set standard of typical feminine beauty and behavior, she finds her niche elsewhere, in the world of roller derby. Embraced by her team, Bliss becomes Babe Ruthless when she joins the Hurl Scouts and finds

her place outside of "normal" society. While the film does celebrate deviation from the norm in the typical spirit of roller derby, it fails to recognize the reward for rejecting social constructs.

Ice Princess directed by Tim Fywell, depicts Casey Carlyle, a dedicated young nerd who finds herself knocking at the door of an ivy league education, something that her mother has been working toward their entire lives. This film exemplifies the problematic representation of women in athletic environments as Casey becomes distracted from her sports desire by cliched high school drama, relationship problems, and achieving status as a women consistent with socially acceptable presentations of femininity. This film helps to convey the notion of feminism, but it shows feminism as something young girls must reject to follow her dreams. The struggle becomes defying her mother's expectations for academic achievement which presents a false sense of feminist agency, or recognize societies acceptable version of feminism. The film ultimately fails at recognizing any assertion of authority that would authenticate Casey as a true feminist character, capable of creating and owning her own athletic identity.

Ice Princess **Unfrozen**

Casey Carlyle is a dedicated student and daughter who is determined to earn a scholarship and admittance into Harvard using her developed understanding of physics, that is until she discovers her true desire to become a figure skater and professional athlete. Joan, her mother, a self-proclaimed feminist does not support her daughter's athletic aspirations. Thus, the need to hide her passion becomes necessary in order for Casey to dedicate herself fully to her actual passion while avoiding disappointing her mother. The moment when Casey's mother Joan Carlyle (Joan Cusack) finds her hidden uniform and skates in a backpack, the audience feels as

though Casey has been hiding a dirty secret. Joan takes on the role of the shocked, disbelieving parent, who has been given the surprise of a lifetime. She finds that her daughter has been working an extra job, taking ballet lessons, and putting school on the backburner for the sake of ice skating. When Casey elects to use her athletic ability, instead of her academic prowess her mother responds with, “You’re giving up your dream”. To which Casey replies, “No mom, I’m giving up yours” (Fywell & Johnson, 2005). There are pressures to live up to and inherit the legacy of the parent and societal expectations, and in many cases the ideal form of physical presentation for a women does not include ice skates, roller blades, or cleats. Joan attempts to turn her daughter into a feminist reflection of academia, but her daughter’s identity is outside of that desired projection. The “dream” to perform in an academic setting outside of a physical career is possessed by Joan, a symbol of the audience's expectation for not only Casey, but all women. Thematically, the mother becomes a representation for the desire for girls to reject athletic desire and alternate identity in favor of a traditional feminine lifestyle. Joan wants Casey to follow and academic path, therefore becoming her legacy. Society willfully attempts to force women to conform to a traditional gender role, ignoring all hints of individual presentations of a non-normative identity.

Casey must chose to reject her mother and everything that she stands for a stereotypical feminism, or else conform to a traditional role in society. While Casey has already deviated from female normativity by performing successfully in a field of science, her desire for athletic participation is still out of reach. It is the depiction of the pivotal decision to break away from their assumed role in society that includes for Casey following the collegiate path that her mother has outlined for her. In a hope filled turn of events, Casey achieves her desire to become a

professional figure skater by the conclusion of the movie, yet she is not allowed to completely reject the educational path that she intentionally disregarded. She is not permitted to rely entirely on her passion and growing talent for the sport that she attempts to dedicate her life to, instead hinting that she will continue her college courses. This subtle acknowledgement of having a back up plan deconstructs the original message of the film, which is to follow your dream. Instead, Casey must "come out" as a female athlete and elect to establish her nonconforming identity and then somewhat illogically not depend on her athleticism to get her farther than a college degree could. This is problematic, in that men's sports film's often become focused primarily on men reaching as far into the athletic field as possible, without attention to an educational backup plan. In this moment, Casey's mom and the audience are given the confirmation that Casey will in many aspects, conform, and here is where the feminist potential collapses.

One of the major points of contention in *Ice Princess* concerns the revealing nature of the ice skating uniform. Casey listens to a criticism of figure skating uniforms by Joan who says that they are "too skimpy" and therefore sexualizes the wearer. Later, when Joan discovers that it is her daughter who is wearing the uniform she condemns it, turning her analysis on her daughter with an important question, "Are you sure it doesn't just make you feel beautiful?" (Fywell & Johnson, 2005). The transformation from geek to supposed ice princess is an essential and provocative elements of the film. The question that Joan asserts is one that demands a feminist consideration. If a woman elects to dress a certain way because it makes her feel beautiful, then it is feminist; however, this is not what happens in the film. The uniform, as shown by Tina Harwood (Kim Cattrall), is an essential part of participating in the sport. It is arguable that even when Casey is dressed in her mother's outfit of choice (Appendix, Section One, Image A), she is

neglecting to present herself in a feminist way. In order for Casey to embody feminism she would need to assume a costume of her own selection and creation. The film shows two sides of a spectrum that should be abolished and forces them to celebrate that Casey has decidedly taken the option that society deems as beautiful. Yet, it is still disappointing when it is understood that Casey has both literally and figuratively put on the dress. Her transformation from plain to pretty should make an informed audience realize that they never experience Casey actively selecting her uniform, and in fact most of the time she seems uncomfortable by the lack of coverage, pulling at the unitard or wearing a jacket whenever possible. The uniform in this case is highly sexualized and not worn in an act of feminist authority, but instead as a way to grant the audience release from the concerning way Casey presents as slightly tomboyish at the beginning of the film. Thus, the presentation of feminism is as troubled as the transformation of Casey into a true ice princess.

Casey must fit within the ice skating girl's clique before she can become successful at the sport. Casey not only enters into the world of athletics, but she is thrust into a new homosocial environment entirely composed of competitive women. Figure skating is a solitary sport, which Casey is able to infuse with her knowledge of physics in order to achieve a more advanced performance. It would have been advantageous to present an antagonist who could challenge her talent on either an intellectual or a physical level, but the closest the audience is presented with in terms of an adversary is Zoe Block (Juliana Cannarozzo), who serves as a poor villain in that she exacerbates the mind games and social competition within the team that Casey is supposed to find guidance and support from. The other girls take on the role of societal watchdogs, and they are unrelenting. As the movie progresses, it becomes understood that the ice skating clique of

girls do not change their exclusive behavior; instead, Casey changes to fit their standards and assimilate into the group only after meeting their criteria.

Casey assumes the role of the girl's who treated her as Other until she participates in their feminine rituals. The standards are set high in order to become a member of the ice skating girls who make up the female homosocial environment of the movie. Casey is expected to establish her identity as a feminine woman before she can dedicate herself to her sport. In Sena Christian's article, *The Radical Potential of Women in Sports*, the reinforcement of a patriarchal system even within entirely female homosocial sports environments is explored:

> "One way our patriarchal social system tries to repress the radicalness of women in sports is by questioning a female athlete's femininity. The media raise the ridiculous and inconsequential question of whether or not a woman who is an athlete - or a woman who is strong - is still a woman. In addition, female athletes are asked to make their transgressions acceptable by demonstrating their heterosexuality". (3)

The film becomes entangled with the necessity to establish Casey as an athlete, but an appropriately feminine one. Both "athletic" and "strong", Casey has the potential for greatness as a figure skater, but the audience is assured that her "masculinity" will not detract from her cultural participation as a traditional woman. Initially, Casey must achieve an impressive ice skating level without the help of the experienced girls, and once accepted she must go to parties. Eventually, she becomes a replica of the girls who discounted her for years. There is a scene that shows Gen Harwood (Hayden Panettiere) gawking impressed at her work on Casey in a mirror that reflects the two girls who now, after a beautification montage scene, look almost exactly alike (Appendix, Section One, Image B). When Casey is allowed to become a member of the

group, she begins to participate in the rituals of womanhood, moving past her tomboyish origins. Her initial drive to focus entirely on improving in the sport is disrupted by her assimilation into traditional homosocial female bonding. Gen Harwood is designed as the stereotypical popular mean girl and plays the antagonist who slowly evolves into a friend and a decent person. She is in charge of directing Casey from tomboy to princess and continues to make changes to Casey until she is a replica of Gen's own culturally accepted high school popular girl. The audience rooting for society has been appeased with Gen taking Casey under her wing. Casey is initiated into traditional presentations of femininity. Instead of allowing her teammates to help her make strides in an athletic field and become a better figure skater, the power of the homosocial environment has been used in order to steer Casey away from her dangerous tomboyism.

Indeed, it is only after Casey conforms to traditional presentations of femininity that she is able to truly perform in the perfect skate that is the culmination of her training. Casey earns her win not entirely by her performance alone. First, she must find a way to be accepted by the group of girls she is in competition with. They turn her from ordinary looking girl to a supposed "Ice Princess". Instead of highlighting her newly developed strength from the many workouts and ballet lessons, the audience is directed to the final unveiling of conventional beauty. Casey's achievement is founded, not in her athletic ability, as she continually falls and misses jumps, but is discovered in her journey from a nerdy plain jane to a woman who wears make-up, dresses, and is the picture of a socially acceptable women. Casey is depicted as a girl who becomes exactly what society expects of her (Appendix, Section One, Image C). Her feminist mother is villainized throughout the movie for trying to force her daughter into the mirror image of herself. What happens instead is far worse. By the end of the film, Casey has become the quintessential

mean girl, surrendering nearly the entirety of her identity in an attempt to become societies approved version of an athletic female. She dawns the sexualized uniform, makeup, and attitude of her peers. In the end, it is not her talent that sets her apart, but her ability to conform to the wishes of society. In giving up her own mother's dream for her to become a strong female figure, she becomes the student of the very woman who was the major antagonist of the film. A women who injured her in order to get her own daughter ahead. Casey not only conforms to the visual presentations of an athletic women that the audience would approve of, but also she adopts the role of Tina's cliched daughter, which suggests that this is the only way she can become victorious. Society has allowed Casey the win exclusively because she has fallen into line of traditional feminine presentations of beauty and behavior.

***Bend It Like Beckham*, but Not in My House**

Parental authority and the value of traditional presentations of gender are prevalent throughout the film *Bend It Like Beckham*. This film is unique because Jess's journey toward becoming a professional soccer player is directly comparable to her sister Pinky (Archie Panjabi) who pursues a traditional lifestyle. Mrs. Bhamara discovers Jess playing in the park with boys and the discussion that ensues convey's the parental desire for tradition, "I was married at your age, and you can't even cook" (Chadha & Nayar, 2003). Even her father joins in by reinforcing the sentiment of society that Jess needs to start "behaving like a proper woman" and be a "good girl" (Chadha & Nayar, 2003). Her parents tell her it is time to grow up and leave soccer to childhood. Similar to the events in *Ice Princess*, once her hidden sporty secret s discovered Jess is shamed by her family like Casey for not focusing on her academic career and marriage

(Appendix, Section Two, Image A). Her mother, Mrs. Bhamra (Shaheen Khan) tries to pass on the female traditions to her daughter, giving her the legacy of the women in their culture. This includes teaching Jess how to cook for her future husband and family, and also by providing her with a college education and a "proper" career. These are activities that her sister becomes successful in, but evidence such as Jess's scar, acquired while cooking as a child, suggests that traditional domestic practices have not come easily or naturally to her. It becomes painfully obvious in the film just how uninterested Jess is in passing on the traditions of the women before her. This desire to deviate from conforming traditional femininity and to exemplify a new feminist athletic identity, creates a scene that parallels *Ice Princess*, built on the astonishing discovery and ultimate "outing" of Jess as a women with athletic desire. The scene sets up a major conflict in the film, she must assert her authority and become a soccer star or else hide her desire and conform to expectation.

One of the biggest problems in *Bend It Like Beckham* that Jess has with participating in the league is her required uniform. The shorts that show her calf, and therefore her scar, make her uncomfortable. This discomfort is founded in the idea of an outward blemish that could make her less beautiful in the eyes of society. In the beginning of the film, her mother opens with "she should not be showing off her legs like that, she's bringing shame onto her family" (Chadha & Nayar, 2003). Not only does her mother have a problem with her physical presentation in the uniform, but so does Jess. It becomes so much of a problem that she is pulled off to the side and has to consult with her coach about it. The moment becomes fraught with tensions over with presentations of femininity and is problematically resolved by a man encouraging her to ignore the mark. This is one of many moments in which a feminist homosocial bonding could occur

between her and another female player in order to establish a closer team bond, yet this potential is passed over in order to reinforce and further the traditional relationship between male coach and female athlete.

Jess is forced to conform and wear a dress by the end of her film. Unlike Casey, Jess does not need to wear a dress in order to participate in her sport. However, she does need one in order to show her ability to assimilate into her traditional Indian culture. There is an image of a humorous moment from the film that depicts the fruits of female homosocial bonding as the women of Jess's team come together to help her put on the traditional outfit. Physical representation become important for nearly all of the athletic women of the film. Even Jules mom has a problem with her physical presentation, "You have a daughter with breasts, not a son. No guy is going to want to go out with a girl with bigger muscles than them" (Chadha & Nayar, 2003). Masculine women are thematic in the films. This disturbing masculinity connects with the patriarchal permission which allows Jess to participate while her scar is showing. Only the head coach, a man, assures Jess that her injury is not so bad. When they compare scars she discovers that at least her scar is not debilitating enough to take her out of the game, it's just unattractive. Only when she is with the boys in the park do they see the burn and call it "disgusting". When she starts playing, they forget about the scar because they become more engrossed dealing with her as a talented opponent. Jess's mother is more disturbed than anyone that she is "showing her scar to the world", and while it is obvious that the scar is not important to her playing (Chadha & Nayar, 2003). Yet, it still becomes a problem that only a man can help her to look past.

Just as in *Ice Princess*, Jess in *Bend It Like Beckham* is given a full body makeover by her new teammates. After the defeat in Germany, Jules (Keira Knightley), Jess's best friend, calls in

reinforcements to transform Jess from the soccer playing tomboy into a real woman. Ultimately, this leads to a rift in the homosocial female team dynamic when the relationship between her and the head coach Joe (Johnathan Rhys Meyers) progresses because she is now what society deems as beautiful, her scar covered appropriately, and the end result of Jess's transformation causes a rift between her and Jules. The make-over scene is present and helps to reinforce traditional standards of beauty (Appendix, Section Two, Image B). Only once a woman embraces the world of traditional femininity is she qualified to attract the man. While the beginning of the movie focuses on athletic aspiration, midway through it centers on girl drama involving a fight about a boy. Two female athletes become distracted over the head coach, who should be off limits to both. It becomes less of a sports film and instead a high school cliche about two girls fighting over a relationship.

The ending of *Bend It Like Beckham* is truly dissatisfying, as it reinforces patriarchal authority and rewards conformity to gender norms. Only when Jess has given up everything and everyone she loves for her family does she get her happy ending. At her sister's wedding, the audience sees her as the perfect statue of societally approved femininity. She is wearing makeup, dressed in beautiful jewelry and draped in the bridesmaid's dress that has been selected for her. Jess even pretends to put on a happy face and participates in the wedding as her sister gets married and the final game goes on without her. It is only when her father comes to her and gives her permission to go that she leaves to play the final game of the season with her team (Appendix, Section Two, Image D). The reinforcement of traditional male authority and patriarchy is not uncommon within female athletics:

> According to Rachel Zuk of the Women's Sport Foundation (personal communication, December 1996), when women do participate in sports, they are often on women's, not coeducational, teams. The world of sports that they are exposed to is a male world. They are coached by men, train and compete in facilities controlled by men, and operate in an institution that has rules and norms that support traditional male values involving performance, competition, and winning" (Carpenter and Acosta 1993).

The theme of patriarchal authority rules in *Bend It Like Beckham*. Even though Jess joins a women's soccer team the major authority is still her male coach. Both on and off the field men decide what, when, and in what manner Jess is allowed to perform. Her father becomes the deciding factor for Jess's participation in the final game. Before she can participate in the soccer match that will potentially give her the future that she desire's, she must conform in every conventional sense of femininity before her father allows her to play. Therefore, the film makes sure to correct her gender deviation before she is given what she wants most. The audience is reassured that Jess will still present herself in a traditionally feminine manner and that she will behave.

The fear of the audience stems from what J. Jack Halberstam coins the "predatory butch" (Female Masculinity 193). The need to get rid of tomboyism and write it off as a childhood practice for girls lends to the anxiety that a girl will carry masculinity into adulthood. For Jess, her mother is incredibly vocal throughout the film that she needs to embrace womanhood, but not until her father reinforces the maternal call for traditional femininity, does she listen. The perceived consequence of Jess following her passion will result in an identity transformation which society and the audience tend to imagine as the horrifyingly "bull dyke" from

Halberstam's. The worst thing that Jess and Jules can become in their families eyes is masculine lesbian lovers. The point of condemnation for lesbianism is reinforced by Pinky's wedding being canceled after Jess and Jules are mistakenly seen kissing in the street and when Jules mother must be comforted when she wrongly deduces that her daughter may be gay. While adult female masculinity is Hollywood's terrifying consequence, that stems from youthful tomboy transgressions, in fact, it is just a form of identity. Much like electing whether or not to dress in very little clothing or to show no flesh at all, identity is something that true feminism dictates be selected by the individual exclusively. Jess, if given the opportunity, would prefer to play soccer with Jules instead of partaking in domestic traditions, which puts them both under suspicion for lesbianism. The tension filled plot point of the lesbian controversy, though humorous, is a problem. The villainization of the butch lesbian is a common occurrence in films, and it has become cinema's favorite tragic ending for women who are unable to embrace their feminine side. A change must occur where masculine women are celebrated, particularly in athletic films when embracing that identity is empowering show of feminist agency. Films must work to depict women whose families and communities are proud of their muscles, athleticism, and masculine authority, or be confined to the anti-feminist attitudes which repress the authentic self and punish deviation.

The family aspect of this film takes into consideration what some women must face in order to become successful athletes. Jess is told by her father and mother what tests she will take what career path she will follow, and which boys she will date. Consequently, by the end of the film, Jess fails to act based on her own desire to play soccer, or even to date the guy she wants. Instead, she waits and nearly misses her opportunity to succeed at what she loves because she

has not received permission from her father. Only when her father consents to her participating in the final game does Jess leave her sister's wedding to do what she wants.

Whip It, Real Good

The opening scene of *Whip It* shows Bliss in the bathroom of a beauty pageant trying to rinse what was meant to be temporary blue hair dye out. She fails, and she is forced to march on stage where an audience judges her on her nonconforming appearance (Appendix, Section Three, Image A). In a moment of torturous contrast, she is placed against a backdrop of porcelain looking girls, all of whom are wearing the perfect makeup, dresses, and fixed with a plastic smiles. Later, after the film has progressed past her success in the world of roller derby, her mother Brooke Cavendar (Marcia Harden) and father Earl Cavendar (Daniel Stern) discovers her skates and a conflict of interest occurs that ignites a battle between tradition and progress. While Bliss wants nothing more for external life practices to reflect her internal identified sense of self, her mother wants her to become a projection of socially defined femininity. It becomes necessary for Bliss to hide her inclinations toward the world of roller derby, and in a twist, must focus instead on coming out to proper society. The history of roller derby is built on alternative groups that function outside of "normal" society. It is one of the sports that was created and designed with women as the main participants. It has grown as a deviant subculture that celebrates a lack of conformity. Through rejecting her mother's expectations, Bliss disregards societies constructed gender roles, "You really need to stop shoving your psychotic idea of fifties womanhood down my throat" (Barrymore & Mendel, 2009). In this film, Bliss takes on a defensive role with her parents, unashamed of her athletic desire. When confronted by her

parents, she even tries to snatch her gear back during the confrontation (Appendix, Section Three, Image B). Unlike in the other film's, after the secret is out, Bliss is not ashamed of her inclination toward derby, but instead she is enraged at her parents for keeping her from what she truly loves. This cinematic depiction of the female athletes "coming out scene" presents the audience with a woman determined to perform her identity, no matter what the cost.

In *Whip It*, Bliss presents herself with two identities throughout the film that act to parallel conforming and non-conforming behavior. The first identity is society's and the audience's favorite. Bliss is the name given to her by her parents and suggests a delicate traditionally feminine mannerism. The temperament her name suggests, the audience quickly discovers, is not in alignment with her actual traits and personality. Therefore, it is appropriate that later in the film Bliss transitions to Babe Ruthless once she discovers roller derby. The transformation from Bliss, who is struggling and failing to perform on the expected level of traditional femininity, to powerful, sexualy empowered, physically competative Babe Ruthless is both astonishing and inspiringly feminist. At the beginning of the film, Bliss is an unhappy yet unable to express her displeasure until she realizes what it means to be able to break the binary and perform as an empowered woman, capable of athletic superiority and domination.

Unlike in *Ice Princess* and *Bend It Like Beckham*, the conclusion of *Whip It* does not end with Bliss putting on a dress, but instead it concludes with her rejecting the ill fitting uniform of society. While it is never made clear in *Ice Princess* if Casey desires the dress that she wears at the end of the film, it is absolutely certain that Bliss does not want it. In a rousing celebration of female homosocial environment, it is Babe Ruthless's derby friends and teammates who help to liberate her from the dress she is wearing at the beauty pageant. The team comes together in

order to free Babe Ruthless of Bliss so that she can attend the final derby match instead of competing in a pageant (Appendix, Section Three, Image D). Babe Ruthless conducts a feminist act by renaming herself and refusing the dress. Thus, of the three films highlighted in this project, *Whip It* exemplifies a sport that legitimizes women and the power of choice when it comes to selecting both a costume and a derby name, and Babe Ruthless overthrows Bliss for this freedom. However, there is a cost because: "The hierarchy of U.S. sport is organized so that it naturalizes, legitimates, and reproduces male superiority" (Kidd 1990; Nelson 1994; Rinehart 2005). This is replicated within the depictions of women's role in sports. As the product of a dominantly masculine society women are shown not as active members of competitive sports, but instead as temporary participants

But, before this moment of release, Bliss begins the film in an environment that is a socially approved form of competition for women, a beauty pageant. In beauty pageants, competition is founded on aesthetic beauty and conforming attitude. Women are judged on physical appearance and rehearse meaningless answers to unimportant questions related to hypothetical social situations. In the appendix an image shows Bliss being forced to serve the traditionally high school clique in the restaurant where she works (Appendix, Section Three, Image C). As expected, the interaction is another reminder of the ways that she is unable to function within the confines of a societal stereotype. The would be competition for a top spot in the high school hierarchical clique and front runner in the beauty pageant is Corbi (Sarah Habel). As the antagonist for Bliss on a socially accepted performative level based on the confines of gender, Corbi is the quintessential mean girl. There is no opportunity for physical contact, teamwork, or shows of masculine behavior. Competition becomes focused on which women

most effectively display's traditional femininity. In the world of beauty pageants, the antagonist for Bliss becomes exactly the girl her mother and the judges approve of and who they want Bliss to become. Luckily, the audience is spared the competition between Bliss and Corgi after Bliss alter ego Babe Ruthless physically shoves Corbi out of the way, both literally off a handrail and figuratively so that the film focuses on the more appropriate physical competition involving roller derby.

On a physically competitive level in the world of roller derby, Bliss faces an opponent who is more true to the antagonist concerned with the sport itself in the form of Iron Maven (Juliette Lewis) and the roller girls on the opposing team the Holy Rollers. Instead of becoming exclusively entangled within the group of girls who rejected her for not conforming to societal expectation, she finds support in the friends she has found while becoming a part of the culture of roller derby. In an insightful moment of conversation between Bliss and her best friend Pash (Alia Shawkat) after Bliss knocks the prototypical mean girl Corbi off of a handrail, she remarks, "we deserve better villains" (Barrymore & Mendel, 2009). This remark alludes to the traditionally feminine non-athletic female who is presented as competition within the film Corbi and connects her to the more worthy villain Iron Mavin. Mavin is Bliss's athletic competition and stands in between her and a derby victory, instead of Corbi who reflects the cry for Bliss to compete in the context of the acceptable non-physical confrontation. The statement incorporates not only *Whip It*, but the other athletic films as well, whose villains are rarely exclusively competitive athletes. This notion of the appropriate villain within cinema emerges from what the audience considers appropriate forms of competition in female athletic environments. The film delivers competition on an athletic arena, where physical shows of aggression are not only

approved of, but encouraged in the roller derby universe. Encouragement of traditional presentations of femininity are still enforced, yet while the women of the Hurl Scouts do provide Bliss with makeup tips by giving her eyeliner, in the next moment they give her another important team gift, a mouth guard which brings back the relevance to the sport. Unlike *Ice Princess* and *Bend It Like Beckham*, Bliss is able to retain the features of herself which do not comply with social norms. She avoids becoming a conformist construction of the unoriginal antagonist laid out for the uninformed audience. In a direct assault to the age old term "if you can't beat them, join them," Bliss does what the uninformed audience is terrified of and rejects her pageant obsessed enemy Corbi in order to focus on not only her new masculine identity, but also she joins forces with her new all female clique created outside of the rules of society the Hurl Scouts without having to change and overcome their athletic competition.

Ultimately, Bliss breaks away from conformity, literally rejecting her mother's way of life and embracing a masculine sport centric identity instead. If Bliss's mother symbolises traditional female role, then her father becomes a symbol for traditional male role within society. Throughout the film Bliss mirrors her father when she, drinks beer, participates in sports, and repeatedly fails to perform as a stereotypical girly girl. Only when she discovers her identity as a "Derby Girl" does she uncover a homosocial environment that allows her the space to embrace her non-traditional gender performance. But, there is a cost. Bliss does not conform to societal or family pressures to assume the identity prescribed by society and is not given the athletic win at the end of the film. The lack of a win at the end of the film reinforces punishment for deviations from societal constructs. Bliss does not transform into the traditional standard for what social constructs define as an attractive women using the power of the female homosocial support

system she has founded in her roller derby participation, Bliss breaks away from expectation in order to pursue what she desires. Despite the clearly expressed disappointment and total lack of support from her mother, the protagonist rejects the beauty pageant event, and this successful rebellion is met with athletic failure.

There are numerous problems with the ending of *Whip It*, even though it achieves the status as the most feminist film out of the pool of movies analyzed. The first problem becomes the need for patriarchal approval in order to participate in the last roller derby match. Much like Jess in the end of *Bend It Like Beckham*, Bliss is not released from her traditional female role until she finds support in her father. This moment helps to re-establish the notion that patriarchy will always hold a higher authority than the maternal figure in a family dynamic. Along with this is the ending that is acts to punish Bliss for her deviation from traditional gender performance. She is unable to attain the win that is especially saved for women who become the traditional mean girl by the end of the film. Women have largely been excluded from contact sports such as football. One of the main defenses for barring women from participating is that male only sports, is, that they are simply too violent for women to participate. This argument has been eviscerated by women dominating the roller derby world. Roller derby became more popular after the release of Drew Barrymore's *Whip It*. The sport is full contact and involves many of the elements of football, with addition of roller skates and less protective gear. Roller derby is a sport made uniquely for women and by women. Largely, league's are self-founded. The athlete's must help set up, run fundraisers, and organize practices, often while working full time jobs. The movie *Whip It* does well to highlight many of the struggles women face in sports, yet it fails to integrate the potential rewards for deviating from gender conformity.

Conclusion

The paradigm of the win means that a victory is exclusive to those women who fall in line with the expectation of society and their audience. A masculine women is not permitted the final goal or to even participate in an athletic world. The films that I have explored demonstrate the danger of the uniformed audience, and their ability to reinforce dominant patriarchy. In *Ice Princess*, Casey assumes her feminine identity by accepting the make-up, the man, and her role within the female clique. She performs in a traditionally feminine manner at the end of the movie which is rewarded with the obtainment to pursue her passion for figure skating. *Bend It Like Beckham* is perhaps the worst perpetrator as the tomboyish presenting Jess must break into a picture of femininity before her father (a walking symbol of patriarchy) allows her to participate. However, conformity in both cases leads to victory. In contrast, *Whip It* focuses on Bliss, who actively rejects her mother's traditional values of femininity, when she elects to show off her passion for roller derby in the final game rather than stand and be judged for how she fits into traditional ideals beauty. This deviation of cultural standards for gender performativity leads to a loss of the big game.

In this manner, these films teach girls that passion, talent, and effort are not enough to achieve athletic dreams, not for women. They teach women to stick to the predetermined values held by society and a constantly judging, always vigilant, uninformed audience. If they deviate from these social constructs, then they will never find a place within society. Certainly, they will not be rewarded for their nonconforming behavior with an athletic victory. They teach that to turn away from stereotypical standards is to never be acknowledged as intelectual, talented, highly capable women. Films such as these put the cost of participating in athletics as never

obtaining a win because winning is only for the women who participated in traditional feminine cultures and traditions, not exclusively in sports. Currently, women's sports films reserve the athletic win as a prize for women who submit to their parents and social norms. These cinematic representations are examples to aspiring female athletes everywhere, and they currently send the message that women cannot perform at the same level as men without first addressing their personal lives. Film representations of women participating in athletic environments show the need to comply to social expectation and live by socially constructed notions of gender roles, using winning as a reward for conformity. Yet, women living authentically represent empowered athletes who assert their identity, regardless of gender expectation. Women who break away from gender specific performativity and participate in sports must be represented in film as people who can win and embrace the support, unity, and competitive spirit of an all female environment. Women must be shown as independent intelligent individuals with capabilities beyond the boundaries prescribed by an oppressive society. Athletic films need to progress toward authentic portrayals of women who win.

Appendix

Section One

IPC-C368-35A Photo Credit: Rafy
L-R: Joan (Joan Cusack), Casey (Michelle Trachtenberg).

(A)

(B)

(C)

Section Two

(A)

(B)

(C)

Section Three

(A)

(B)

I

(C)

(D)

(E)

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