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Sk8er girls: Skateboarders, girlhood and feminism in motion[☆]

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Synopsis

In an era where girls are seen to be predominantly postfeminist, we investigate the potential for a feminist politics within the subject position of “skater girl.” We explore the actions of eight girls, “the Park Gang,” and their purposeful positioning as skateboarders within one local park in Vancouver, Canada. By challenging the male-dominated culture of skateboarding, the Park Gang worked to expand the possibilities for subjectivity within girlhood. As well, by occupying the position of “skater girl,” the Park Gang enacted a bodily resistance to other girls at the park who used emphasized femininity as a source of power. This discursive and embodied resignification of girlhood challenges conventional thinking about today's girls and their disassociation from a feminist politics. We conclude by suggesting that feminism, if it is to continue to be relevant to younger generations, must stay on the move in order to keep up with these and other transformations within girlhood.

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Labelled “postfeminist” by some of the academic and popular press, teenage girls have often been accused of letting feminism down (Abraham, 1997; Bellafante, 1998; Curthoys, 1997; Douglas, 1994; Garner, 1997; Pipher, 1994; Preston, 2001; Rapping, 2000; Summers, 1994).¹ Younger generations are frequently charged with enjoying all the freedoms won for them by the women's movement without engaging in the struggle themselves. This attitude, according to Judith Stacey (1990, p. 339), is “the simultaneous incorporation, revision and depoliticization of many of the central goals of second wave feminism.” Teenage girls are

repeatedly labelled postfeminist as a way of suggesting that they are not carrying on the traditions of the women's movement and have in some sense failed second wave feminism in its legacy of collective political action and social change.

This “invocation of generational conflict” (Parkins, 1999, p. 377) has created a divide between today's girls and feminists of the 1960s and 1970s. Angela McRobbie (2000, p. 211) notes that in the British context, “few young women identify themselves as feminist. It is old and weary.” And Shelley Budgeon's (2001, p. 7) study of girls' alienation from second wave feminism suggests that the women's movement has failed to maintain “intergenerational currency.” Even in the 21st century, many girls continue to see feminists of the second wave as “man-hating, dungaree-wearing, hairy armpitted,

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butch dykes and 'Plain Janes' angry at the world because they can't get a man" (Nurka, 2002, p. 185). Having never been the focus of the second wave's political agenda, this negative characterization from girls is not surprising. In order to maintain the "personal is political" politics of the second wave, feminists were engaged in a battle of nomenclature that did not, out of necessity, include the word "girl." "Girl" became a four-letter word as part of a strategy to bring authority and power to women. Because men used the word "girl" to infantilise women, feminists avoided it for political purposes. But as Marion Leonard (1997, p. 232) suggests, "[t]he second wave insistence of the use of the term 'woman' to some extent reduced the value of the term 'girl', where 'woman' was equated with an empowered feminist adult, 'girls', defined by immaturity, were depoliticised." As such, girls were never a concentrated focus of second wave feminist politics.

The charge of postfeminism levelled at today's girls gathered speed in 1997, during the height of Spice Girl popularity and its accompanying doctrine of "girl power." Dubbed "lipstick liberation" (Abraham, 1997) and "self-obsession" (Bellafante, 1998), girl power was quickly pronounced "feminism-lite" and diluted of significance by feminists who saw it as capitalism gone amuck. Corporate consumerism, it was believed, had created a palatable way to access girls through the guise of popular or pretend feminism.² In an issue of *Time* magazine with the provocative question "Is feminism dead?" on its cover, Nadya Labi (1998) writes of girl power:

So you're hoping the Spice Girls are history. Well, alas, they are. The bustier-busting sloganeering they purveyed is the touchstone for much of what passes for commercial feminism nowadays, especially the kind marketed to the demographic group the Spices are proudly empowering: preteen and teenage girls. Or "grrrls," as the tiresome battle growl goes. Is this the future of feminism?

With the insult of cultural dupe weighing heavily on girls for their musical taste, consumption habits, and reiteration of girl power as politics, it seemed that older feminists had deepened the "generational cleavage" that had already gathered between them and today's girls (Yong, as quoted in Parkins, 1999, p. 377).

In and through this postfeminist discourse, girls and girlhood have been the topic of considerable scholarly and popular writings since the mid-1990s.³ Two distinct states of girlhood dominate much of this research: girls-at-risk and girls who "have it all" (Harris, 2001). The first example comes from psychological discourse, which tends to view girlhood as synonymous with victimhood. In *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, Mary Pipher (1994, p. 22) notes that "[a]dolescent girls are saplings in a hurricane. They are young and vulnerable trees that the winds blow with gale strength." Pipher blames this victimization on puberty, popular culture, and peers. "Something dramatic happens to girls in early adolescence," she writes. "Just as planes and ships disappear mysteriously into the Bermuda Triangle, so do the selves of girls go down in droves" (p. 19). This so-called "Ophelia complex" is meant to sound a warning bell to parents and teachers that teenage girls are "in trouble," "drowning," and "lost."⁴

The second example is rooted in girls' studies⁵ and third wave feminism,⁶ two discourses that have done much to bring girlhood into the popular fore by spotlighting "kick ass" girls with an overt feminist politics and representations of powerful girls in television and film. Yet despite this girl/grrrl friendly emphasis, it has been somewhat limiting, focusing mainly on the autobiographical feminist narrative (Edut, 1998; Karp & Stoller, 1999; Shandler, 1999), the veneration of fictional girls, such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer and the Powerpuff Girls (Driscoll, 2002; Early, 2001; Havrilesky, 2002; Owen, 1999), and forms of explicit youthful feminism, such as Riot Grrrl and Cyber Girl movements (Driscoll, 1999; Kearney, 1997; Wald, 1998). While this girl-centred writing has been integral in bringing academic attention to girls, it often seems as though girls who fall outside of these culture-producing parameters are left to the wayside of girls' studies and third wave agendas.

In the wake of these post/feminist discourses, we wonder if today's girls really have let feminism down or if they have simply been ignored. There is little emphasis on the lives of "regular" girls and their practical experiences of the social world. What is missing from these discourses is a desire to talk to real girls about their daily social and cultural practices in order to find out what shape and form feminist politics

may be taking in the 21st century. Where are the “everyday” girls who do “everyday” things? When we talk to girls about everyday things, we may begin to hear all the ways in which girls are quietly but powerfully changing the face of girlhood through localized and specific gender struggles. When we talk to girls who are seemingly postfeminist or who are not involved in any form of “obvious” feminism, we may be surprised to discover a feminist politics embedded in the rhythms of everyday life that challenges the accepted indictments of postfeminism, cultural dupe-dom, and victimization.

In her study of bedroom culture in the new millennium, Anita Harris (2001, p. 128) suggests that girls have developed “new forms of political expression” that take place in new spaces. Harris explores how girls “express their politics when the prevailing view is that they have no politics to speak of at all” (p. 139). Focusing on “gurl” webpages, alternative music spheres, and underground zines, she demonstrates “that young women are passionately engaged in social change agendas, but that these occur in marginal, virtual or underground places” (p. 139). It is here, at the margins of space and place, where girls may be “doing” feminism. Furthermore, girls may be pushing feminism in exciting and diverse directions—away from the usual possibilities that currently receive post/feminist attention. What follows is one such example that was an “incidental” find in a larger study on alternative girlhoods.⁷ While interviewing girls within the frame of new subjectivities, we happened upon a group of eight skateboarders, whom we call the “Park Gang.” The story of the Park Gang exemplifies both a discursive and embodied resignification of girlhood that has feminist significance, opening up new avenues for exploring feminism within girlhood, as well as girlhood within feminism. The act of resignification entails a change in meaning that was previously accepted as “natural” and fixed. As meaning is created within the social sphere, resignification necessitates a change in something that is accepted within a social context. The story of the Park Gang exemplifies such a change in meaning within the social sphere of the skate park.

Becoming girl skateboarders meant that the Park Gang had to challenge the skater boys who dominated the park. They also consciously stood in resistance to what Connell (1987) calls “emphasized femininity.”⁸

Emphasized femininity is a kind of traditional femininity based on subordination to men and boys. In order to resist emphasized femininity, the Park Gang engaged in a transgressively feminine bodily comportment that is not common for girls. As becoming a girl skater in today’s North American context often necessitates engaging in these discursive and embodied struggles, the subject position of “skater girl” is a social category that holds the possibility for a feminist politics. Subject positions contribute to subjectivity or how we understand ourselves in relation to the world. Subjectivity “is produced in a whole range of discursive practices—economic, social and political—the meanings of which are a constant site of struggle over power” (Weedon, 1987, p. 21). By occupying the subject position of skater, the Park Gang worked towards a subjectivity that indicated a feminist politics through resistance to the male-dominated space of the park and the emphasized femininity of the girls who hung around the skater boys. A feminist politics, as we are using the term, is based on the subject positions one chooses to take up and whether or not these positions include opposition to hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity. Inherent in this kind of political action is agency. From a feminist poststructural standpoint, agency necessitates recognizing the ways in which we have been discursively constituted as gendered beings and then working to reiterate this constitution (Butler, 1992, 1999; Davies 1990, 1997).

As discussed by Kelly et al., 2005, agency conceived of in this way entails playing discourses against each other in an attempt to offset how hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity are produced at the skate park. By engaging in the act of skateboarding, the Park Gang recognized how they were being discursively constituted at the park. Through this recognition, they were able to resignify what the label “skater” could mean. Furthermore, by “doing” skateboarding, the Park Gang worked to resist the traditional femininity modelled by other girls at the park—the girls “who just watched.” Thus, skateboarding became a subject position fraught with gendered struggles that highlighted the discursive and embodied construction of girlhood. What does it mean for a girl to choose to occupy a subject position that is loaded with such battles for legitimation, motility, and space? This article is an exploration of this question as it

relates to expanding notions of girlhood and feminism at a time, to echo Harris (2001), when “everyday” girls are not thought to be political in the least.

Legitimation at the skate park: skateboarding as a discursive resignification of girlhood

Most skaters are young teenage boys who think they are kings and the world sits below them. Trying to tell them that women should be able to skate without being harassed may be an impossible task, but it must be done.

–Jigsaw Youth

Skate parks are generally awash in a grey, graffiti-ridden concrete that is the necessary landscape for practicing tricks. Vancouver has several good places for skateboarding, but most are burdened with a reputation for drugs and vandalism. The largest indoor park in the city was recently shut down for its high level of drug trafficking and defacement of property. Underground skaters who detest anything remotely mainstream avoid the parks, confining their practice to the streets, the parking lots of local establishments, and the (now monitored by security) area surrounding the art gallery downtown. For those skaters who do not mind mainstream skateboarding, the parks are the best place to practice, learn tricks, and participate in skate culture. But no matter which skate park or street location you choose to frequent, one thing is abundantly clear—there are very few girl skateboarders.

As Sandy, a self-proclaimed skateboarding “coach” for her friends announced in no uncertain terms, “Like, a lot of girls don’t skateboard!”⁹ Skateboarding is not a common activity for girls and finding a girl on a skateboard is rare. Despite the recent media frenzy around teen pop singer Avril Lavigne, who has been dubbed a “skate punk” for her style and loose connections to skateboarding, girls are often relegated to the sidelines while the boys “do their thing.” Further evidence can be found by visiting skate parks, where girls hang off the railing as watchers, fans, and girlfriends. Evidence of this can also be found on numerous Internet skater zines dedicated to girls.¹⁰ One girl skater writes, “Every time I venture out to skate, either alone or with friends, I am in some way

harassed, threatened, or opposition to my skating is voiced in some manner” (Jigsaw Youth, 2002). And there is this testimonial of frustration by Morgan:

Once upon a time, I was a lonely girl skater in a big city. I went to the indoor park a few times a week, but there were never any other girls there and the guys seemed to want little to do with the girl in the corner teaching herself kickturns. As much as I loved skating, it was necessary to give myself a serious pep talk to get motivated to go back to the park each day (Frontside Betty, 2002)

These accounts of life at the skate park indicate the gendered nature of skater culture, where girls have to work much harder and overcome many more obstacles than boys to gain legitimate skater status. The subordination and delegitimation of girls to boys is a common theme in youth sub/cultures. Paul Willis (1981) represents girls in working class “lad” culture as sexual objects for the more powerful boys. In Dick Hebdige’s (1979) analysis of punk culture, girls are represented as accoutrement and secondary figures. McRobbie and Garber (1997 [1976]) first pointed out that youth cultural studies theorists saw girls as backdrop characters in male dominated subcultures, whose lives revolved around finding a boyfriend, looking attractive, and being promiscuous. But in their own analysis of girls in male subcultures, they concluded that traditional sex roles were also dominant in biker culture, mod culture, and hippy culture. Girls were given very little status and almost no legitimation. In skater culture, girls are assigned a similar kind of derogatory positioning. Yet despite the sexism of the skate park and of skateboarding in general, there are still some girls who choose to take up the label of “skater.”

The members of the Park Gang were 14 and 15 years old at the time of the study—born in the decade defined by a backlash against second wave feminism (Faludi, 1991). They all lived in an area of Vancouver known for its family orientation, professional demographic, and urban chic. Four were Canadian-born Chinese girls, two were White, one was a Canadian-born Latina, and one was half First Nations, half White. This racial mix is representative of the city of Vancouver itself, which is ethnically and racially highly diverse. With the exception of one girl, who

attended a Catholic school, the girls all attended a large urban high school known for its Asian population and academic achievement. Skateboarding was a passion for four of the girls; two of the girls called themselves “coaches” in the sense that they skated but preferred to “just help”; and two of the girls were skaters by association, meaning that they were involved in skate culture, music, and style—like all of the Park Gang— but without the desire to actually skate.¹¹ They all hung out at a skate park that would be considered amateurish compared to the larger and more daunting parks downtown. This particular park was connected to a community centre in an affluent neighbourhood. It was relatively clean and safe.

Given their occupation of a subject position that held the possibility for a feminist politics, we found it interesting that some of the Park Gang espoused a postfeminist ethos. Sara, for example, did not see the relevance of feminism today because she had never encountered a situation where “I wanted to, like, do something because, like, it wasn’t how I wanted it to be.” And Emily did not think being a girl carried any stigma whatsoever: “I think it’s pretty much even with guys now.” To some of the Park Gang, feminism had become a form of reverse discrimination. Emily noted that feminists were not trying to make things equal, but rather “boost” the women above the men: “Like, it’s constantly, like, a fight, instead of just being equal. They [feminists] just want to be better than men.” Pete also expressed the idea that feminism was a form of discrimination. “I think sometimes feminism is brought a bit too far,” she said. “Um, like, there is, ‘Yeah, I want to be equal to the men, get paid the same wage for doing the same job.’ And then there is, ‘I’m going to go out and be a fire fighter just for the sake of having women in the force.’” Although some of the Park Gang expressed postfeminist sentiments, their desire to “do” skateboarding told a different story.

Members of the Park Gang were relatively new skaters when we met them. They came to the sport through older brothers or boys at school. Grover noted that she got started because a friend did not want to learn alone:

There are not too many girl skateboarders so it is kind of better—she felt more comfortable if there was, like, you know, another person that, you know, could be with her. And so she asked if I wanted to try it, so I

said sure, and, um, her brothers started teaching us and I found it was something that, it was a lot of fun, so I just stayed with it, so I’m still learning.

When more of the Park Gang decided to try skateboarding, they ventured into the skate park with their boards for the first time, hoping to gain acceptance and practice. But the park proved to be a location of struggle that was dominated by skater boys, who put the girls under surveillance. The skater boys were always asking members of the Park Gang to show them what they could do and Zoey spoke of the constant questioning of the girls’ abilities. They often asked her, “Why don’t you skate *more*?” She admitted that, “sometimes we don’t want to skate around them ’cause, like, they do really good stuff and we’re just kind of learning.”

The Park Gang quickly realized that being the only girl skaters at the park singled them out for some harassment. To the skater boys who dominated the park and acted as its gatekeepers, the park was their space—a space that left very little room for girls, unless they were occupying the traditionally feminine subject positions of watcher, fan, or girlfriend. Gracie theorized that girls skate less than boys due to this kind of territorial attitude: “some [girls] are kind of, like, scared, because, um, of what people might think of them.” When asked what she meant, Gracie noted that the lack of girls who skated at the park might make the boys question girls’ right to belong. Onyx added that the skater boys viewed the Park Gang as “invading their space.” Grover felt that the Park Gang threatened the skater boys “just because, you know, girls are doing their sport.” She went on to explain the attitudes of some of the boys at the park.

Sometimes, they’ll be kind of, like, rude, like, I don’t know if it’s on purpose, but they just, you know, have this kind of attitude...I guess they think they’re so good and one of them or two of them—I’m not sure if all of them are, like, sponsored by skateboarding companies—so they always feel, like, you know, they’re kind of superior and so, you know, we’re only a year younger, so it’s kind of, like, we’re obviously not as good as them, but they kind of forget that they had to start somewhere too, so, and it would be harder for us because we’re girls.

The territory of the park became a contested space. The boys saw it as theirs. The girls wanted access. Grover, Gracie, and Onyx understood that the boys were threatened by their presence, but wished the boys could appreciate how hard it was for girls to get started. They wanted the boys to see them as equals who deserved the same kind of camaraderie that they gave each other. But instead, the boys saw them as interlopers with little legitimate claim to the space. Some of the boys accused some of the Park Gang of being “posers.” Often, girls who try to gain skater status are seen as posers. A poser wears the right clothes, such as wide sneakers with fat laces, brand-name pants and hoodies, and, of course, carries a skateboard. But posers do not really skate. Although boys can be posers too, girls who attempt access to the label “skater” are singled out for this derogatory title. It is assumed that girls hang around the skate park as a way to meet skater boys, to flirt.

When this accusation was levelled at some of the Park Gang, they immediately took action to prove the skater boys wrong. Zoey recounted the story.

There's this one time where a couple of the guys thought we were just—they said it out loud that we're just there for the guys and we're like, “No!” And they're like, “But you're here all the time, like almost every day, skateboarding, and so are we.” So we did this whole thing where we didn't come there for quite awhile just to show them; and then we came back and they stopped bugging us about it.

The girls involved in the park boycott practiced at an elementary school for two weeks and went to the park only when they knew the boys would not be around. When asked what they had gained by boycotting the park, Zoey responded, “That we're not there just for the guys and we're not there to watch them and be around them.” Suddenly, the girls received more respect and experienced less harassment from the skater boys. Zoey noted a distinct change in their attitude. “I guess to some level, they treated us like an equal to them, kind of.” Instead of placing the girls under surveillance, the skater boys watched the Park Gang in order to see “how they were doing.” They suddenly became curious about the girls' progress. When asked if they thought they

had successfully changed the opinions of the skater boys, Zoey enthusiastically replied, “Well yes!”

The girls involved in the boycott retreated to a safe space where they were not being monitored. When they re-emerged, they were ready to fully occupy the subject position of “skater.” In so doing, the girls challenged who a “skater” could be by challenging the skater boys' power over who had legitimate claim to the park. This discursive struggle for naming and authorization necessitated an understanding of the discourse of the park. The boys were interfering in the girls' desire to occupy the subject position of “skater.” By blocking the subject position of “skater,” the boys retained some control over the girls' sense of who they were. Recognizing how unfair this was, the girls responded by gaining control over their own subjectivity. They retreated to a space where they were free to think of themselves as “skaters.” When they returned to the park, they were armed with both a sense of confidence about their skating abilities and a sense of entitlement to the “skater” label. They took authorizing power away from the boys and legitimated themselves.

Before the boycott, the skater girls were thought of in a very specific way: as posers, flirts, or interlopers. But through the boycott, the girls believed they altered how the boys thought of them and, more significantly, how they thought of themselves. In their efforts to change the meaning of “skater,” the Park Gang acknowledged how they had been subordinated at the park and successfully resignified the commonly accepted process of belonging. They carved out a space for girls where none used to exist. In this way, the Park Gang legitimated the subject position of “skater” for girls at the park and expanded the possibilities for subjectivity within girlhood. As Pete pointed out, “lots of girls have actually started [skating] because my group started and then they kind of feel in power. I think they kind of feel empowered that they can start now, that it's okay for girls to skate.” This discursive resignification of girlhood through the skater label enacted a feminist politics that worked to reshape gender categories in a male-dominated locale. As a result of their purposeful positioning as skaters, the Park Gang also worked towards an embodied resignification of girlhood that challenged not just the skater boys, but the traditional femininity of other girls at the park.

Kickflipping femininity: skateboarding as an embodied resignification of girlhood

First of all don't play dumb. If you are going to skate, skate!!! Who cares what the guys think. And please don't hang out at the skate park with your skateboard just to pick up guys. Cause it ain't working! Just be yourself and you will go a lot farther.

–Abbey Whitney (2001)

The skate park was a hangout for all different kinds of youth, many of whom did not skate, but instead chose to sit on the benches, picnic tables and steps that surrounded the concrete area designated for skaters. It was a place where girls and boys could gather to socialize. Some of the girls were well known as the “popular” girls at school. They had boyfriends, money to spend on “the right” clothes, and a nickname ascribed to them by the Park Gang based on the fact that they often wore buns in their hair—“Bun Girls.” The Park Gang saw Bun Girls as representative of a certain kind of girl that they did not respect. Pete explained that the Bun Girls were annoying people who lived by an image “that kind of pisses me off.” When asked to explain, Pete painted this picture: “Skinny, the whole thing, the whole skinniness, having, being skinny, thin, pretty, makeup, umm, lots of money, shoes, be spoiled and then kind of living their life for a guy. That kind of annoys me too!” She went on to say: “I notice that they [Bun Girls], like, all dress, like, they have, they have to have some sort of motivation to dress up like that and I think it's to be popular, to kind of, um, get guys. And so, I don't like that. I think it's just totally wrong to live your life like that!”

The Park Gang continuously described the Bun Girls as trendy, boy crazy, and clueless. Their “ditzy” reputation stemmed from the fact that they spent much of their energy worrying about clothes, looks, and boyfriends. Bun Girls wore tight, low-cut tank tops and tight, low-cut jeans from expensive, brand-name stores. Their appearance was coiffed, polished, and en vogue. The Bun Girls had a power that was based on bodily display, sexiness, and a perceived maturity or sophistication. While some of the skater boys responded to the Bun Girls' sexuality, the Park Gang generally tried to resist enacting this kind of power, seeing it as “fake” and built around a passive bid for attention from the

boys.¹² Gracie noted that Bun Girls often played “dumb” and “tough” when they did not mean it at all. Sandy explained this fake attitude: “Yeah, like, [the Bun Girls are like] ‘Oh, I don't care about that!’ when really they would care or they're just hiding it. Like, as if people are putting up, like, a façade!”

Members of the Park Gang often actively worked to resist Bun Girl femininity. Instead of caring about what others thought of them, the Park Gang saw themselves as individuals with unique personalities who took pride in being different, fun, and alternative. A Bun Girl was seen to be a carbon copy without any sort of defining characteristics, except, as Grover put it “caring what other people think.” For members of the Park Gang, this kind of self-conscious behaviour was all too typical and gave girls a bad name. Zoey put it like this: “Yeah, because, you know, the whole thing, like, where a lot of girls want to be sexy? That is totally the opposite of us. We don't. We don't and we kind of don't really like those kind of girls that do, because it's for popularity and stuff like that.”

The Bun Girls were “watchers” at the park who used their inability to skate as a way to meet skater boys. As Zoey described them: “They're [Bun Girls] always, like, they get on the board and ask for, like, the guys to hold their hand and pull them and they start screaming, you know, acting weird.” When asked what members of the Park Gang did when they saw the Bun Girls acting this way, Zoey replied, “We just roll our eyes and walk away.” Bun Girl femininity was giggly, ditzy, and purposefully subordinate to boys. It was based on physical appearance, money, clothing, and inactivity. Creating a distance between the Bun Girls and themselves was as important to the Park Gang as gaining the respect of the skater boys. By purposefully juxtaposing themselves to the Bun Girls, members of the Park Gang demonstrated an embodied resistance to a dominant form of femininity that they saw as detrimental to girlhood itself. For example, in order to differentiate themselves from Bun Girl femininity, the Park Gang dressed casually and comfortably. They avoided wearing makeup and did not engage in sexual display through style. They also worked to speak their minds and did not pretend to be “ditzy” or in need of skater boy assistance on their boards. But the real distinction between Bun Girl femininity and the embodied resistance of the Park Gang was the difference between “watcher” and

“doer” at the skate park. As “doers,” or girls who actually skated, the Park Gang engaged in the embodied resignification of Bun Girl femininity through a distinct bodily comportment.

Skateboarding is a sport that demands physicality and bravery. To skate is to know how to fall and how to attempt many complicated and risky tricks. Even the most basic trick, the ollie, where a skater jumps in the air with her board attached to her feet and then lands smoothly on it again, runs the risk of injury. Ollies, kickflips, grinding, and carving are all skater tricks that must be performed fearlessly and with the full knowledge that falling is likely (especially for the Park Gang, who were new to tricks and only just attempting them for the first time). This kind of physical audacity is not generally associated with being a girl. As Iris Marion Young (1989) suggests, typical motility and spatiality for girls can be timid, uncertain, and hesitant, as girls are not brought up to have the same kind of confidence and freedom in their movements as boys. Young sees femininity as based on a particular bodily comportment that is restrictive of big movement and risk-taking. Girls are not often seen to be capable of achieving physical acts that require strength and power or handling the pain that such physical acts can incur. Willingly inviting pain is seen to be boys' territory. Boys are ascribed the kind of confidence and craziness needed to carry skater tricks through to completion. Girls are not. Members of the Park Gang were aware of this gendered notion of motility and bodily comportment. When asked why girls did not skate as much as boys, Onyx noted that girls might see skateboarding as “a guy thing to do. It is our thing to sit around and chit chat and gossip and stuff and watch them skateboard.” Grover added, “Yeah, and some girls are kind of, like, scared.” But Onyx retorted that she and her friends did not “think like that. We wanted to try it.” Emily, too, reasoned that girls “don't want to continuously fall,” and realized that skater boys are much less worried: “Like, guys there, they fall and they keep falling, but it's amazing, but they always get back up and, like, try the same thing again. It's quite amazing.”

By “doing” skateboarding, members of the Park Gang engaged in a transgressive bodily comportment

for girls. They were willing to straddle their boards with a wide stance; dangle their arms freely by their sides; and spread eagle for balance. They knowingly made spectacles out of themselves, courting the gaze of the skater boys and the Bun Girls. While some of the Park Gang were not keen to “wipe out,” others, like Zoey, lovingly recounted their experiences of falling: “like, the first time I wiped out, I was just, like, ‘Whoa!’ I fell really hard. I was, like, ‘Aahh!’ kind of. And then I just wanted to do it again, because it was like, ‘Wow!’” The adrenaline rush some of the Park Gang felt came from knowing they were engaged in an activity that most girls (and boys) did not have the guts to try. As Amanda suggested, most boys at the park were more “risk taking” than girls. “They don't care if they, like, get bruises and stuff. They'll be, like, ‘Yeah! Cuts!’ And then girls will be, like, ‘Oh no!’” But some members of the Park Gang willingly accepted the risks involved in skateboarding as a way of setting themselves apart from Bun Girl femininity. Not only could they become skaters who challenged the skater boys at the park, but the Park Gang also realized that they could challenge forms of femininity with which they disagreed. The Park Gang's purposeful positioning as skaters once again worked to push the boundaries of girlhood in productive directions.

Quickly and bravely: girlhood as a resignification of feminism

We began this article by questioning the commonly accepted idea that today's girls are postfeminist and that in their postfeminism, girls have let the second wave down. But the story of the Park Gang shows that feminism, at least in one local skate park, is thriving. It does, however, take a different form than the collective social action and explicit political agenda of the second wave. The feminism of the Park Gang is displayed through their conscious positioning as skateboarders, a subject position that necessitates the discursive and embodied resignification of girlhood. Who is allowed to belong? Who is granted legitimation and by whom? What message does being a girl skateboarder send to other girls? What message does being a girl skateboarder send to

boys? These are precisely the political questions the story of the Park Gang raises. In their positioning as “skaters,” members of the Park Gang enacted a feminist politics that suggests an awareness of inequality based on gender. This feminist politics was based on agency as recognition of how they had been constituted as girls in and through the discourse of the skate park. Through this recognition, they were successfully able to enact a reconfiguration of meaning within the social context of the park. The boys accepted the unfixing of the label “skater” to include serious girl skaters. And other girls who had skater interests began to see the label “skater” as attainable when previously they did not. Furthermore, by purposefully juxtaposing themselves to the Bun Girls, the Park Gang displayed a different form of girlhood that stood as a statement against emphasized femininity.

But what do these resignifications of girlhood mean for feminism? Should we continue to ask if feminism is relevant to today’s girls? It seems that the question, itself, is no longer relevant. Feminism, as a movement, evolved in order to deal with the everyday realities of being women in this society and to address the inequalities that these realities provoked. But such realities inevitably change, as do the circumstances that surround them. Similarly, girls are constantly in a state of change. Not only are girls in a state of “becoming” women, but they are also subjects. In the poststructural sense, a subject is “the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process” (Butler, 1992, p. 13). A subject is therefore in a state of perpetual flux. Feminism thus needs to be continually transformed if it is to keep up with girlhood. The question, therefore, is not whether feminism is relevant to girls, but rather how do girls and feminism mutually transform each other in the wake of this shared instability?

The story of the Park Gang displays a feminist politics in the lives of “everyday” girls, but it also depicts the continuous resignification involved in girlhood. By noticing such transformations, we become aware of just how unstable girlhood is. A fixed and stable understanding of feminism cannot keep up. Only a feminism that moves at the speed of girlhood can be useful and relevant to girls. Girlhood therefore acts as a resignification of feminism. It is a reminder that feminism is a

politics that must stay on the move if it is to remain a significant force for localized and social change. Second wave feminism’s fault has been to cling to a foundationalism that, according to Judith Butler (1999, p. 189), “presumes, fixes, and constrains the very ‘subjects’ that it hopes to represent and liberate”. Girlhood is a reminder that this foundationalism will only widen the gap between generations, not lessen its divide.

Perhaps it is time for feminism to explore new and diverse possibilities that will bring new and diverse subjects into the fore, thereby helping to keep feminism in motion. We see “everyday” girls who do “everyday” things as a good place to start. As McRobbie (1999, p. 72) suggests, we might try looking for resistance in “the more mundane, micrological level of everyday practices and choices about how to live...”. In so doing, feminism can begin to move at the speed of lived, daily experiences—into the hallways at school, dances, the playground, the mall, community centres, fast food parking lots, and the skate parks. In short, it can move as quickly and bravely as a girl on a skateboard.

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Endnotes

¹ Susan Bolotin (1982) originally introduced the term “postfeminist” in the *New York Times Magazine*. Her article, entitled *Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation*, was a first-hand look at young women and their disinterest in feminism. Susan Faludi (1991, p. 13) characterizes the emergence of postfeminism in the media as an example of feminist backlash that gives young women the “false impression that equality has been achieved and encourages young women to pursue their individual freedoms at the expense of a collective female identity”. Similarly, Budgeon and Currie (1995, p. 184) see the postfeminist discourse in the media as an endorsement of a “women-centred individualism” that “assumes rather than questions equal opportunity for women”.

² For exceptions to this critique, see Acker (1997), Douglas (1997), and Driscoll (1999).

³ Prior to the mid-1990s, girls and girlhood were rarely featured in academic and popular writings. Some exceptions are to be found in the fields of youth psychology (Gilligan, Lyons, Hanmer, & Emma Willard School, 1990) and feminist cultural studies (Lees, 1986; McRobbie, 1991; McRobbie & Garber, 1976; Roman, Christian-Smith & Ellsworth, 1988).

⁴ For other examples of the girls-at-risk discourse, see Orenstein et al. (1994), Brown (1998), and Simmons (2002).

⁵ Girls' studies is a recent off-shoot of women's studies and feminist cultural studies, focusing on girlhood as a "separate, exceptional, and/or pivotal phase in female identity formation" (Wald, 1998, p. 587). This nascent field is still unrecognized in many women's studies departments.

⁶ Third wave feminism is meant to distinguish the political pursuits of today's younger feminist generation (so-called Generation X) from that of the second wave. Three anthologies are often claimed as the "founding" texts of the third wave. Barbara Findlen's (1995) *Listen up: Voices from the next generation*, Rebecca Walker's (1995) *To be real: Telling the truth and changing the face of feminism*, and Heywood and Drake's (1997) *Third wave agenda: Being feminist, doing feminism*. More recently, *Manifesta* by Baumgardner and Richards (2000) has been added to the list.

⁷ The larger study, entitled *Girl Power*, was a 3-year research project carried out in Vancouver, Canada from 2000 to 2003. Shauna Pomerantz conducted the skater girl interviews over this period, interviewing each girl twice in various pairings. Pairings for the first set of interviews were not always the same for the second set.

⁸ For a detailed discussion of "emphasized femininity" and its relation to skater girlhood, see Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie (in press).

⁹ All names are pseudonyms chosen by the girls in the study.

¹⁰ Examples of online skater girl zines include: frontsidebetty.com, withitgirl.com, sk8rgirl.com, girlskateboarding.com, girlsskatebetter.com, and gurlzonboards.com.

¹¹ Although skate culture has been continuously redefined since its original incarnation in 1970s Californian surf culture, many elements remain the same today—a dedication to punk rock (now splintered into pop punk, old school punk, hardcore, and Goth), a love of baggy clothes, a close connection to marijuana and "partying," and a slacker reputation (think Bart Simpson). In contemporary North American society, skateboarding has been taken up by mainstream marketing machines, such as Nike and Adidas and sold back to its constituents as a skater image, composed of expensive sneakers, brand name clothes, and flashy accoutrement. While the Park Gang liked pop punk bands, such as Linkin Park, Sum 41, and Green Day, they did not buy expensive skater clothes from the numerous skate shops in Vancouver's trendiest neighbourhoods, opting instead for an alternative second-hand look. Grover, for instance, wore men's dress shirts and black gloves with the fingers cut off. The Park Gang also did not smoke marijuana or "party" and considered themselves to be "good" girls who listened to their parents. They saw skate culture as "fun," "crazy," and "alternative," but had no wish to be lumped in with other skaters, who broke the law, drank, did drugs, or slacked off in school.

¹² It should be noted, though, that Onyx, a very pretty member of the Park Gang, was aware of the attention she

garnered through her looks and was just beginning to notice the power she held.

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