

## INTRODUCTION *Skate to Write, Write to Skate*

### *Fresh Ice*

In 2002, at age forty-three, I bought a pair of figure skates. It was almost on a whim although they weren't my first pair. I'd figure skated for a few years as a kid, enough to learn beginning jumps and spins. Despite a family income that was far too limited to pursue the sport seriously, I had even acquired one pair of skates with a key marker of goals beyond occasional recreation: The boots and blades came separately. After I quit skating in 1973, I kept the skates for decades. Mostly, they hung on a hook like a pair of idled toe shoes, except for a few ventures in the 1990s on a pond next to my office. Finally, during a 2001 move, by which time they were incredibly stiff, decrepit-looking, and, I had to admit, too small, I got rid of them, imagining they'd be my last pair. Even if I wanted to skate again, I reasoned, I wouldn't know which boots and blades to buy.

Maybe tossing my old skates initiated a tiny, percolating "no, wait!" Maybe it freed up a bit of longing that my nostalgic attachment to "good" skates had actually squashed, because my feet hurt merely putting them on. Whatever the reason, a few months later, on the lookout for a workout activity in my new neighborhood, it occurred to me that I hardly needed "boots and blades" anymore, just skates. I suddenly wanted to find some. I went to the local Play It Again Sports, bought low-end figure skates, learned that I lived four blocks from an indoor rink, and took myself to a public-skating session. All I could do at first was skate shakily around the edge of the rink, but I really enjoyed it. When I saw that the rink offered classes for adults only, I signed up, started back at the beginning, and was increasingly drawn in. I knew I was hooked after I fell on a turn six months later, badly spraining my writing wrist, and heard myself in the emergency room asking, "when can I skate again?" before almost anything else.

I was back on the ice three weeks later, on the way to becoming an "adult figure skater," which, in skating culture, is both a colloquial and

official term for people like me. While “adult” as a common euphemism for “sexual” may invoke thoughts of a xxx movie, “adult skater” refers, among skaters and within the skating organizations that regulate training, testing, and competition, to people skating after an age when they might reasonably expect to become the next Brian Boitano or Peggy Fleming. The term also refers to a skater who never figure skated as a child or had insufficient childhood training to make a serious run at national competition. Brian Boitano, then, is not an adult skater but a figure skater who still skates. Some people classified as adult skaters, however, can be recognized from certain skills and their ease on the ice as having quite significant childhood training; they occupy a slightly different conceptual category.

I had expected that buying skates would help me switch up my workouts a little. Instead, over the next few years, skating changed my life dramatically. It transformed my athletic life, my work life, my social life, and, less directly, my erotic life. It increasingly determined my long-range plans as well as my daily and weekly schedules, which I came to arrange around available ice time and other physical activities, like ballet and cardio, that I newly thought of as cross training. It changed how I use and think about my body, about bodies in general, and about interconnected matters regarding gender, sexuality, sports, movement, resources, risk, age, race, economics, politics, pain, and pleasure.

### *Gay Games, Queer Paths*

This book emerged from my skating. But it began with an opposite intention: to get more skating out of a book project. In 2005, at dinner with a few friends, the group started talking about a road trip to the Gay Games in Chicago the following summer. An international athletic competition for adults, the Gay Games, echoing the Olympics, takes place every four years. With “participation, inclusion, personal best” as its motto—in deliberate opposition to the Olympics’ “faster, higher, stronger”—it offers competition in a wide range of sports, including track, soccer, rowing, bowling, DanceSport (competitive ballroom dancing), ice hockey, and figure skating. People can compete at diverse levels, divided in some sports according to age and ability, and sometimes with options for a queer twist. Figure skating includes “same-sex” pair competitions, which several of us at dinner thought would be fun to try.

Our group plans didn't get too far. Yet the idea stayed with me after the realities of expense, time, and other obstacles had taken out everyone else. I didn't really understand why I wanted to do it. I still don't. Yes, by that point, I was pretty deep into skating. I skated three or four times a week. I had a lot of skating friends. I was back to boots and blades. I still took group classes but also private lessons from a coach. I skated in the adult-skater production numbers in the rink's annual recital, which I loved. It fulfilled a certain hankering to be a backup dancer, a hankering big enough to embolden me in my first year past a lot of shyness as well as self-consciousness about a relatively low skill set.

But that didn't mean I wanted to perform solo programs, which are the routines set to music used for testing, exhibition, or competition. I'd only had test programs up to then and I could hardly handle skating them on practice ice. Sometimes other skaters just stop and watch. Because I have stage fright about certain performances—although not, for some reason, about teaching, presenting at conferences, or being a guest speaker—I dreaded those moments. During work on my first, beginning-level test program, I'd managed to avoid the situation because it had been choreographed to allow skaters to succeed somewhat independently of musical particulars that otherwise would require such-and-such a move on such-and-such a beat. So I'd go to public-skating sessions and practice the Freestyle I program, which was set to music from the movie *Titanic*, to Van Morrison's *Tupelo Honey* instead. *Tupelo Honey* was compatible enough in tempo and in heavy rotation at the time on the "classics of yesterday, best of today" radio station playing over the loudspeakers. In general, while I love movement to music, and the challenges of mastering a program's tricks and choreography, I'd never seriously even considered doing a solo in our ice show and certainly not for competition. I'm not much of a competitive type anyway, so that whole idea largely seemed alien to me.

So what was up? Probably an impending fiftieth birthday contributed a certain now-or-never impulse. I'm hardly the only person to toss physical and emotional challenges at advancing age. W. Hodding Carter IV recounts trying to qualify for the 2008 Olympic trials at forty-five in a book that is subtitled *The Probably Insane Idea that I Could Swim My Way through a Midlife Crisis—and Qualify for the Olympics*.<sup>1</sup> Dara Torres, praised in the press for showing what a "middle-aged mom" can do (with a training staff of seven), took on Olympic swimming more famously and

successfully that year, medaling at age forty-one. Stories of related effort, if not matching glory, abound. Indeed, while figure skating at my age often strikes people as unusual, it situates me alongside many people I have little else in common with. Narratives about fear-conquering feats appear frequently in women's magazines for my age demographic, such as *More*, that often have little to say to queer dykes like me. Nor, I presume, do they speak to the comedian Adam Carolla, who offered a similar perspective, getting "philosophical for one second," upon being booted off *Dancing with the Stars* (*DWTS*). Carolla, famous for being unabashedly boorish and sexist on shows like *Loveline* and *The Man Show*, was Marie Osmond's successor in the *DWTS* role of representing for the mid-lifers. He sounded a bit like her, too, when he told viewers, apparently channeling Eleanor Roosevelt: "There's something that scares you. There's something that is *your Dancing with the Stars*. Don't run from it, embrace it, do it."<sup>2</sup>

In any case, while moving back and forth between the inexplicable lure and very explicable terror of competing in the Gay Games, I got an idea: Maybe I'd be brave enough to do it if I wrote a book about it. A book project would give me a second purpose to take my mind off competing and a stake to keep me from backing down. I'd have a reason to approach other skaters once I was there, thus mitigating the shyness that sometimes makes me experience social events as a series of would-be conversations turned into tortured internal struggles. Best of all, I'd get to skate more. Practicing would be research, my job. I wrote a little grant proposal, describing a plan to use the method called participant observation—that is, studying something by doing it—and a research question: How would the gender traditionalism and sexuality stereotypes that dominate figure skating be transformed in a queer context? I got funded to attend, signed up, and talked a former student, Jason Goldman, into reprising his role as a research assistant. He agreed to compete in bowling, so that he could participate and observe, too.

### *Pretty and Witty but Not Quite a Book Project*

The project was on, and I was now skating toward a book, if not quite this one. The question I had proposed about gender and sexuality, a serious one despite its opportunistic genesis, turned out to be a bit of a bust, at least in terms of my preliminary expectations. I thought that the Gay

Games might offer a queerer rink culture in terms of sex and gender than the ones I was coming to know. In some ways, it did. Two women did a pairs routine that was kind of a punk butch/femme romance. A male pair acted out *Brokeback Mountain*, then newly released, complete with the beloved shirt that the heartbroken Heath Ledger character cradles at the end. Other programs invoked topics that had resonance for queer audiences, including one related to mourning that used a square from the AIDS Quilt and the group number, in which I participated. Set to Christina Aguilera's song "Beautiful" ("you are beautiful no matter what they say"), it challenged hate language. Still more competitors drew on camp and drag traditions. One male skater used an instrumental version of "I Feel Pretty" from *West Side Story*, a staple of gay entertainment. The audience response when the skater visibly punctuated the point at which a singer would have announced feeling "pretty, and witty, and *gay*" made the moment an insider love fest.<sup>3</sup>

Yet in many ways, sexuality and gender at the Gay Games ice rink were just the same as I'd come to expect at home. Who thinks of men's figure-skating competitions as the straight games anyway? Who thinks dykes figure skate? The much smaller number of women skaters accorded with the common lore about who participates in the sport, and the dykes I met there who frequently competed at the annual U.S. Adult National Figure Skating Championships, or "Adult Nationals," told me that I had met most of the out dykes who might be there, too. Meanwhile, the stereotype that feminine women figure skate while butches play hockey, hardly the whole truth anywhere, did not seem much differently related to truth at the Gay Games. In the femme/butch pair, the femme, not the butch, was the seasoned skater, and with a few notable exceptions, women's figure skating—note that one had to compete as either male or female—simply was not the Gay Games event for spectators in search of butch eye candy.

In addition, I didn't see much "queer" in the sense of deviating from mainstream, white-dominated, gay cultures. It was fitting that we ended the group number, "Beautiful," wrapped up together in a giant rainbow ribbon, one of the most palatable, popular, and marketed queer symbols, generally taken to reference a celebration of diversity rather than liberation struggles. Relatedly, surveying the program, the skaters, and the audience, I didn't see much that would make me expect a very queer reading of the line in "I Feel Pretty" about a "girl" who is "loved by a pretty wonderful boy." It alluded to gay men referring to each other as "girl,"

sure, but I suspected that probably few viewers would call up the boy as trans, the girl as genderqueer, or the pair as fag and dyke (in either direction). Nor did it seem likely that the number after the *West Side Story* program would be, say, to Queen Pen's "Girlfriend," the pronoun-switching cover of Meshell Ndegeocello's "If That's Your Boyfriend (He Wasn't Last Night)." <sup>4</sup> Queer hip-hop stands to the side of the white-dominated gay canon.

### *I Needed New Choreography*

What next? A lot. To begin with, I knew that surveying the scene and some beginning interactions with other skaters did not really tell me enough about gender as lived or imagined by the participants. I wanted to know more about what I couldn't see yet, more about the normativity that prevailed on the surface, and more about the people who apparently fit cultural clichés. Consider two gay male skaters I met there. One started skating after he "blew out [his] elbows during the first Gulf War" (as a result of abusive push-up drills, not in combat as the phrasing might imply). The other began to skate as a meditative practice during a period when an ex-lover he was still close to was dying with AIDS. How people come to inhabit unsurprising categories like "gay male figure skater" may not be simple.

Nor do apparently simple categories always have simple criteria. What exactly, for instance, is that crazy combination of balletic aristocrat and child-beauty-pageant trampiness that characterizes many figure-skating costumes for girls and women? Why is it acceptable, while decked out in this careful, if confusing, production of highly stylized femininity, for female skaters to readjust their skating panties in front of judges and audiences, or to perform spirals (skating arabesques) that seem virtually designed for crotch display? What are the racial dimensions of acceptable femininity in a sport dominated by white people in which, as I will discuss later, skate-color conventions, rewarded body types, and the occasional harem-girl costume combine to suggest that *Avoiding Racism 101* isn't part of the skating curriculum? These were just some of my questions that did not fold into the simpler "how queer will the Gay Games be?" formulation I started with.

I began to pursue them further, through various research strategies. Many, happily, involved me skating. I explored diverse skating scenes

more mindfully than when I had started out: public-skating sessions versus figure-skating practice sessions; the municipal rink versus the skating club; whatever sessions I could join at places I visited. These included a rink in suburban Philadelphia owned by the oldest figure skating club in the U.S.; a rink in San Francisco with a far more ethnically and racially diverse population than most; a rink in the rebuilt, relocated version of a Portland, Oregon, shopping mall where the notorious Tonya Harding had skated; and the rink at Rockefeller Center in New York City, much smaller than it looks on the *Today* show, where my mother had skated once about sixty years earlier.

As I skated, I cultivated people I met through skating as informants, negotiating along the way how many of them began also and importantly to enter into the “friend” category. I worked as a volunteer coaching assistant for adult beginning skating classes, which enabled me to witness interactively how gender-encoded movements are taught and received as well as some aspects of skating that can fade from view: the long, slow process of learning basic moves that may come to feel like second nature; the huge difference that good equipment makes as opposed to skating on rentals. I competed at Adult Nationals, the competition around which many serious adult skaters organize their skating. In 2008, Adult Nationals took place at Lake Placid, where, despite skating in the lowest freestyle category there, I competed on the rink where the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team beat the U.S.S.R. in what is known in the annals of athletic and nationalistic glory as the “Miracle on Ice.” In 2011, I competed at the Salt Lake City Sports Complex, an “official training venue,” as a sign at center ice reminded us, for the 2002 Olympics, which is famous in the history of skating for a vote-trading scandal that led to the still controversial overhaul of the judging system, including the demise of the perfect 6.0.

Besides studying skating activities and events in which I participated myself, I studied skating that occurred in other contexts. I watched skating on TV as well as many of the competitions covered by IceNetwork.com. Among other materials, including TV skating specials, the website offers archived video streaming, which stays up until the next season, for all the major competitions under the auspices of U.S. Figure Skating (USFS), the association that presides over the competition system within the United States that feeds into international competitions like the World Championships and Olympics. I attended local competitions

for kids and adults and two of the regional competitions that function as a qualifying event for the U.S. Figure Skating Championships, or “Nationals.” (Unlike the Adult Nationals, which requires only passing requisite tests to participate in most events there, the regular Nationals requires most competitors to secure eligibility in tiered competitions along the way.) I went to holiday and end-of-season ice shows at local rinks, besides the ones I skated in, and in 2007 I attended the tenth annual spring show, “A Gift from Africa,” for the group Figure Skating in Harlem, a nonprofit organization that combines figure-skating instruction for girls with tutoring and life coaching.

I also followed two local organizations of women skaters in other skate sports, attending practices, contests, and events: the Greater Portland Women’s Ice Hockey League and the Maine Roller Derby (MRD). The first offers training and playing opportunities both to women starting hockey as adults and the increasing number who played on, or occasionally still play, on teams in school. The MRD is part of the reemergence of roller derby, as, in this recent incarnation, a women-run, women-played sport that, while still often engaged with sexiness, emphasizes athletic contest instead of staged brawling.<sup>5</sup> In turn, some of my observation led to participation. I never tried roller derby, which, I saw immediately, was beyond what my body could handle. But I let some hockey players convince me that playing was the best way to learn about why they loved it. I did learn more, but not with the effect that some of them expected.

### *Sidetracks to the Center*

Meanwhile, as I read, skated, watched, and interviewed in systematic pursuit of research goals, several influences outside of skating worked to shape and reshape the project. These included a voracious appetite for TV talent contests like *So You Think You Can Dance*, *Project Runway*, *America’s Best Dance Crew*, *Top Chef*, *America’s Next Top Model*, and *America’s Got Talent*. Among the biggest narrative makers these days about talent, money, training, and dreams of glory, they helped me bring into focus what I was also learning on practice ice: the extent to which money for training, far more than any talent that carries the implicit adjective “raw,” is the key factor in how far people may advance. The shows also involve repeated encounters with the kind of benevolence scenario famously satirized in the cheerleader movie *Bring It On*, in which an Oprah-like figure provides

the funds for an “inner-city” squad to attend the national championships. As I learned to itemize what undercapitalized skaters might want Oprah to pay for, I wanted to think more about the largesse economics that increasingly fund both pleasure and survival—and the effects of the likelihood that Oprah won’t show up.

A breast cancer scare that required several biopsies affected my work, too. Most simply, it made me realize how central skating had become to my life. When the technician administering what had started as a “routine” mammogram told me that I might need a biopsy, I responded, “This isn’t the right time for bad news. I’m skating in an ice show this weekend and my mother is coming to watch; I can’t get through the show if she knows.” Obviously, I was deflecting panic about deeper-order possible consequences, but it was true. Then, I went straight to the rink to tell Ann, my coach. I remember marveling as I was driving, when fear or forced calm put me into survey-your-life mode, that having barely (and not always) passed gym class, I now not only had a coach but also considered her integral, as both a coach and good friend, to figuring out how to get through the next few days. Once using autopilot was the clear solution, I didn’t tell other skaters until after the show, but skaters figured in every subsequent stage of opening up about it.

Biopsies also started to shift my thinking about risk, age, and choice. Retraining my body to do a backbend so that I could pull my leg up by my blade into a catch-foot spiral had felt somewhat age defying in ways that now seemed delusional against the age-appropriate mutation of my cells. As people kept telling me, that’s why women over forty need mammograms: Cells are more likely to go bad now. (Mine turned out to be nonmalignant “atypical hyperplasia.”) Picking a dangerous sport that risked expense-incurring injuries also had different implications and consequences now that my body was generating trouble by itself, given the hefty-out-of-pocket expenses under privatized medicine even with good health insurance. This juxtaposition of risk-related body troubles was also marked for me physically because many skate blade accidents and biopsies leave, essentially, knife marks on the body. I felt like I’d been handed a compare-contrast assignment that I couldn’t stop looking at and could never drop or finish.

In addition, and much less gravely, I took a new turn in the area of gender and the absurd when I learned that while marketers were asking me, as a member of USA Hockey, if I had titanium in my shaft (the long

handle of the hockey stick),<sup>6</sup> the titanium clip inserted in my breast during my first biopsy was shaped like a breast cancer awareness ribbon, a contested token of corporatized and pink-ified approaches to the disease. These breast and “shaft” titanium products fed my interest in how gender becomes transformed and embedded, in the ribbon’s case literally, through materials and technologies, a subject that had already grabbed me regarding figure skates, which are rigidly gendered by color (skates for females are white, for males, black). I was also struck, regarding the hockey-stick ads, by another contrast: between recent cultural products that seem to parody over-the-top displays of masculinity, like the figure skating comedy *Blades of Glory*, and persistent evidence that vaunted awareness about sexist foolishness did not translate into antisexist attitudes or practices.

### *Hooked*

Finally, as I skated, researched, shared my work, and lived other facets of the life that skating increasingly dominated, I became increasingly focused for various reasons on the topic of pleasure. Adults who love skating often do so intensely. They evince their passion in the costs and risks they undertake to pursue it, in the accommodations they make for it, and in the ways they describe it—often through some widely common habits of reference that reflect, I think, both a desire to express huge and vast dimensions of pleasures and a culture in which extreme pleasure is often considered suspect. Possession, addiction, lunacy, compulsion, disease, or dementia, hence also humorous terms like “adult-onset skating.” As I said earlier about myself, people get hooked.

My research put me in the middle of both pleasures I could apprehend intimately and those that eluded me personally, like the thrill some people find in competition or just about anything people love about playing hockey. These experiences made me want to do more, know more, and think more about pleasures. What sensual, emotional, and mental treats (or just the right trials) may bring someone back day after day and fall after fall? Intellectual interests mixed with political, activist ones, because I could already see how much skating pleasures depend on and illuminate numerous issues that call for thoughtful action on diverse fronts. Some I have mentioned already, like access to time, money, and health care. Besides, if an anti-oppression vision of a just and good world

includes pleasure, then pleasure as an end, not just as a route to knowledge, matters, too.

*I Wrote This Book a Lot Like I Skate*

It was two rich girls who took my mother, Marilyn Graton, skating. She met them in 1943 when, due to a complicated circumstance related to the war, she transferred from P.S. 86, a New York public school full of poor kids, to P.S. 6, a school outside her district that was full of rich kids from Park Avenue. While she still lived in a tiny apartment with only a screen between her parents' bed and her own, her new classmates might dine at home on food borne on silver trays by maids who could be summoned by a button under the dinner table. (Their educational paths, my mother emphasized, would later diverge from hers again. They were destined for expensive private schools like Dalton; she, like other smart but poor kids, went to magnet schools like Hunter or, in her case, Bronx Science.)

As Mary Louise Adams points out in *Artistic Impressions: Figure Skating, Masculinity, and the Limits of Sport*, "Rich people and poor people . . . learn to move their bodies in different ways" through "cultural and economic practices" that can make them look like innately "different kinds of people."<sup>7</sup> The students at P.S. 86, my mother remembers, learned to sit with their hands folded, in front if students behaved, behind if even one of them didn't—"being trained to be good workers, I think." At P.S. 6, students learned to "speak out, work in committees, and write reports." Her new classmates also benefited from having disposable cash for special outfits and lessons, including for skating. Once on the ice at Rockefeller Center, my mother, in skates that hurt her feet, clutched the barrier while her friends, wearing little skating dresses, did tricks in the center. Then as now and as before—always, as Adams details, in changing, historically specific ways—ice rinks were places to display social status and to clock likely class differences.<sup>8</sup>

I owe both this book and my skating, with my own tricks in the center, to similarly intertwined conditions of economic and educational privilege. Like my mother's, my history includes some educational opportunities developed for children more affluent than I, kids who didn't, I was sure, hear "OK, but don't forget that it costs \$25 to have the repair man even *look* at the electric typewriter" every time they wanted to use it. Schools focused on developing independent thinking more than docile

behavior eventually brought me to a teaching position that includes intellectual endeavors in my job description. Partly because it, too, functions with money for teaching rich kids—with some cushion missing from public institutions being devastated by tanked government budgets—it provides me with both the flexible scheduling and cash that permit me to skate.

I also wrote this book like I skate in ways that extend beyond the conditions of doing both. In some ways, that doesn't make my writing different than before. Like anyone's writing, my writing is both a physical and mental practice. As my colleague Rebecca Herzig, who pointed out the writing-skating connection, rightly emphasizes, everything that might be labeled brainwork is always embodied labor. I have strains and remnants of overuse to show for both skating and writing. I'm also one of those skaters who can hardly avoid adapting to other people's music when I'm practicing. With similar habits of ear, I edit my writing for rhythm and cadence—at least the sort of writing that engages my attention to creative form. ("This paragraph needs a topic sentence" or "Don't forget our Athletics Committee meeting at 11:10 on Tuesday" gets no such attention.) In both writing of the former sort and skating, I rework even small bits over and over with the goal of having the product appear unlabored—but accomplished. In both I take risks, and not only physical risks in skating, in the ways I put myself out there.

But other connections to skating are specific to this book. In the same way that assembling a footwork sequence, program, or repertoire of skills happens one turn, one edge, one trick at a time, I wrote each of book's eight sections as a series of short essays or connected lingerings that I came to think were the best ways to get at the topics of the book. For in the details of pleasure—details weird, surprising, and mundane; details physical, emotional, or material; details delicious, repelling, or both or neither—I found that three things resided at the same time: important information about the intimate workings of pleasure, power, and politics; a call for democratized access to pleasures; and the enticing prospect of making pleasures better still. I hope in this book to contribute to advancing work in these three areas, including a sense of their connectedness. The *Red Nails* and *Black Skates* in the title stand in for the juicy, revealing details. Because red nails and black skates can mess with each other and might well generate rich ideas and associations in readers, I find them well suited for that purpose.

I also chose to write short pieces, and to avoid as much as possible academic language, with the goal to offer the pleasure of a good read. Ideally, it will be like a good skating show, carefully ordered yet easy to pick up anywhere, providing small satisfactions and a taste for more: more reading, more thinking, and more pleasure on and off the ice.

### *A Note about Naming the People I Talk About*

I tell stories in this book based on observations, encounters, discussions, and interviews. I refer to people by full name or first name if I've received their permission (or request) to do so. To adhere to the derby code whereby players choose whether to divulge private identities to the public, I offered derby girls willing to be named the option of having me use their derby name, their civilian name, or both. Sometimes I asked permission to name someone after the fact if a casual conversation yielded an insight I wanted to credit or if disguising the identity of the person would be virtually impossible given the details I wanted to relate. I also followed the principle that I was authorized to name people who spoke to me from an official position, but I often chose not to do so. While insiders may deduce those names, I chose not to aid the process; my purpose is not to point fingers. Mostly, however, I refer to people anonymously or by pseudonyms, occasionally omitting or altering demographic, geographic, and other details, along with dates of encounter, to keep people's identities private. Some will recognize themselves anyway—or think they do—without, I hope, dismay.