



*Skating Is Like Sex,
Except When It Isn't*

While pleasure is a central topic of this book, my goal isn't to define it. A relatively satisfying definition circulates widely online: "Agreeable sensations or emotions; the excitement, relish, or happiness produced by the expectation or the enjoyment of something good, delightful, or satisfying."¹ I want to pull the judgmental "good" out of the mix, however, partly for a reason related to my disinclination to define pleasure further. I believe that thinking and acting about pleasure—politically, critically, in innumerable situations large and small—benefit from a certain leap-of-faith openness to accepting accounts of other people's pleasures that might seem alien or inexplicable. Fieldwork, activism, and other activities of research and living have also made me wary about relations between judging, naming, and policing where pleasure is concerned: Because you love x, thus you are a y, so now you can or can't do z.

I prefer to follow the example of Kate Bornstein in *Hello, Cruel World: 101 Alternatives to Suicide for Teens, Freaks, and Other Outlaws*. Bornstein exemplifies a wonderful open-mindedness about what might work for other people and a healthy disrespect for some questionable boundaries delineating the legal. She also has only one overarching criterion: If satisfying a desire entails "being mean to someone else," don't do it.² Like Bornstein, I understand the parameters of pleasure to be a matter for collective, expansive, and malleable definition.

Smells Like Team Spirit

Yet if, and because, *Hello, Cruel World* models expansive thinking, it also illustrates that every single person sometimes needs help to conjure other people's pleasures or make that leap of faith. Consider Bornstein's alternative to suicide #26: "Join a group that wants you as a member, or start your own group." The list of suggested groups illustrates the impressive array of depression-busting, life-choosing, and hanging-in-there

possibilities on offer throughout the book. It includes gangs, unions, and bands; volunteer firefighting organizations; convents, community centers, and political campaigns; health, book, sex, and auto clubs; “The Party” and the mile-high club. Bornstein also offers a sidebar on why it’s OK to “go stealth” if “there’s something about you that disqualifies you” from a group you want to join.³ As she elaborates under #66 (“Go Stealth”), “Every outlaw, freak, or outsider dreams at one time or another of passing for normal, and not having to deal with the staring and the questions and the laughing and the harassment. Moments of stealth are moments free from all that.” You can maintain your integrity if you “work at being the same you, no matter what else you’re being.”⁴ While she doesn’t offer examples of going stealth, I envision someone participating in the Boy Scouts, whose national organization maintains an anti-gay policy, or in a religion-based social group whose stated beliefs don’t accord with yours. Sometimes such groups are the only game in town or the most likely source of decent social interaction. Yet even having embraced the notion that people might benefit from joining groups that are less than fully welcoming or satisfying, Bornstein neglects to mention one type of group that scads of people join and that many people understand as a source of great pleasure and identity: a sports team.

From one angle, her omission is totally understandable. Teams function in some people’s lives primarily as sources of great humiliation and misery whether they’re on teams or off teams or waiting to be picked last for them in gym—or in my case usually second to last and ashamed of feeling relieved to beat out that one girl. Sports teams often represent everything that an “outlaw, freak, or outsider” can’t get away from fast enough. Thus, the 2009 pilot of the TV show *Glee* could economically establish a key theme—misfits in high school—by showing football players perform a daily ritual of putting Kurt, the well-dressed, femmy queer kid, in the dumpster. The scene reads just as clearly as in the 1990 pilot of *Beverly Hills, 90210*, with shots of transfer students pulling into the parking lot at West Beverly High, looking wide-eyed at fancy cars that they hadn’t seen back in Minnesota. On *Glee*, Kurt and the football players are not only antagonists—they contribute to defining each other. Bullying the queer kid and having the jock-tossed dumpster destination identify jocks and gay boys in popular cliché, and as mutually exclusive categories—although *Glee* later complicates that cliché with another one about how homophobes often turn out to be queer.

But then again, there's also the cliché that girls' and women's teams are filled with lesbians. Yes, it's a stereotype, and yes, lesbians on those teams have too often experienced soul-chilling antigay policing.⁵ Still, stories abound of lesbians, proto-lesbians, and other queer people of various genders who found joy or haven, if perhaps imperfect, on sports teams. Without doubt Bornstein knows some of them; I doubt anyone queer doesn't. But something far from what moves you is easy to forget about and hard to envision recommending.

About Yes

Pleasures are diverse and diversely accessible. They can be physical, mental, spiritual, and/or emotional. They can be enjoyable at the time and—or only, differently, or not at all—enjoyable in retrospect. Their causes and content can be obvious or mysterious to people who experience them. They can be easy to articulate or impossible to put into words.

The essays in this section work to bring words and generosity of spirit to people's pleasures. Ice rinks offer numerous occasions to consider the intimate alongside the alien because many people find both there: sports they love to do and sports they'd never want to try (but might love to spectate); people who share a taste for the same sport but find different pleasures in it. "Skating Is Like Sex, Except When It Isn't" brings together diverse accounts of figure skating's intense appeal. I hope to convey the payoffs of attending to other people's pleasures, including maybe even a contact high. "The End of Me, or My Brief Life in Hockey" considers the barriers to that contact high, recounting one of the most informative and distressing features of my research for this book: a brief attempt to play hockey. Finally, "When God Gets Involved" dwells on the pleasures of an unlikely friendship, the possibilities of reaching across seeming chasms, and the movement of the spirit in the life of the body.