

Blade Scars/Biopsy Scars

RETHINKING RISK AND CHOICE

INTRODUCTION *Blade Scars/Biopsy Scars*

My girl, wine on her lips
Tonight's the night she wraps around my fingertips
I know she'll look good with a scar
'Cause that's how we are
—Neill C. Furio, *Black Dahlia Blues*

I sometimes have slice marks on my right shin. Like the little gashes that score my right skate, they come from messing up when I'm trying to cross a slightly lifted left leg over my straight right leg in order to achieve the standard jump or back-spin position for skaters who rotate counter-clockwise. The scars, then, are accidental, although I can't describe them as completely unwelcome. I have to admit that if the cut isn't too deep, I don't mind the sharp little sting or, perhaps, a few minutes later, the slow recognition of a damp, cool sensation caused by little blood droplets emerging along a scratch line. It makes me think that I understand a little about why some people view cutting as an erotic practice, even if I'm most fascinated by mechanics and visuals that I experience on another register. Why does the blade occasionally cut my leg without ripping what covers it, even jeans? Conversely, why can it rip thin tights but leave the skin intact? I'm interested in how scars overlay each other, whether they fade or don't, how I no longer get off the ice to check out the situation. What's a little blood? Who needs to get off the ice for that?

In that bit of bravado lies another appeal. Scars are signs of being serious about skating, tough enough to take the rough and tumble, evidence that there *is* rough and tumble, that I have cuts and bruises to show and tell alongside derby girls displaying the physical evidence of their own fierceness, which they may sometimes feel the need to spotlight, too. It's an impulse I see in Killer Quick's "How to Spot a Derby Girl":

Know what happens when you fall at high speed and slide along the floor? It's called track rash, baby, and o how it burns. Now imagine

someone wearing tiny criss-crossing ropes of fabric all across her legs taking a big fall and sliding along the floor on an upper thigh/hip. The results come in fascinating shapes and patterns, and sometimes take months to fade away.¹

Fishnets as “criss-crossing ropes of fabric”: the description toughens up a staple of derby attire that, to the displeasure of many derby girls who defiantly wear them anyway, compromises derby’s reputation as a serious sport, at least among people for whom the combination of sexiness and rough play on the track always equals “catfight” no matter what signs of sport might be staring them in the face: athleticism, rules, refs, evidence of serious training.

But derby girls have a different image problem than figure skaters. Derby action looks tough all the time. Skaters knock each other across the floor. They scramble up after sprawling and hop right over fallen skaters; according to the rules of the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA), fresh injuries do not stop play as long as the player can crawl off the track before her injury poses a threat to the others.² Figure skaters, in contrast, do a lot to make hard work look easy. We often forgo postures and movements common in other skate sports that both facilitate, and symbolize, the whole body working as one unit in an intense coordinated effort. Think of the derby girl’s or speedskater’s canonic forward-leaning stance, those runnerlike arm movements, or that sleek, hot combo for speeding around an oval: the inside arm held behind the back for aerodynamic advantage while the outside one pumps. Figure skaters, meanwhile, present torso positions and floating arm gestures that often camouflage the challenge of executing them and may seem to do anything but help propel the body forward.

Add in the outfits that may mask indelicate muscles and the common cultural habit of associating anything labeled feminine with weakness, and it’s no wonder that only people prepared or predisposed to see what’s hard in figure skating may view it a serious, grit-requiring sport. I can laugh at that misconception or occasionally even play off of it for a laugh myself; I’m the first person to describe my brief foray into hockey as a crash course in confirming that I’d rather be twirling around. But maybe my blade scars feed a desire to have a story that sounds more fierce: Do you know what can happen when you put knives on your feet and hurl yourself around backward into the air to land on the mere tip of

just one of those blades? It's called perilous, baby, and it's a risk I choose every day.

Spin Out

Sure, whatever; those musings about skate marks started to feel shallow and distant after biopsy marks started to join my collection of freshly acquired scars. In 2008, I acquired two on my left breast. One is a small red bump from the first biopsy, an in-office procedure that involved, basically, drilling a little hole to remove suspicious tissue pinpointed by a mammogram. The other, an incision mark following the border of my areola about an inch around the top, came from a follow-up biopsy, done in a hospital under sedation, after the first biopsy revealed noncancerous but abnormal, rapidly multiplying cells, or "atypical ductal hyperplasia."

Given the spin I'd concocted for my skating scars, I was surprised by how much I dreaded the incision scar. I was just starting to process sentences about abnormality, another biopsy, surgery, the hospital, sedation, and the fact that the word "probably" still modified "not cancer," when I heard myself asking the doctor if the biopsy would leave a scar. Coming so early in the conversation, the question suggested, as the tone of the doctor's response confirmed, that I would factor her answer into my decision about whether to proceed. Actually, I kind of wanted to, even though I knew I shouldn't.

What I didn't ask this time was the question I'd urgently posed to medical personnel when I sprained my wrist six months into skating: How long would I be off the ice? I didn't have to. Six years later, skating was often already a known issue in any given conversation. I remember from right around then the extremely painful discovery upon meeting a lover's close friends that they knew virtually nothing about me. "You figure skate? How interesting." Somehow that seemed a lot more telling than their lack of a clue about my job. My doctor had learned about my skating from the mammogram practitioner, who'd listened graciously when I tried to ward off nerve-racking medical news by telling her that I didn't want to get it right before our ice show. Maybe it was an extra reason that she took the initiative to corral a doctor on that late Friday afternoon, determined not to send me home for the weekend with only a passed-along diagnosis from a radiologist.

I also got unsolicited but extremely welcome advice from my skating

friend Mary Squires, who had called me as soon as I e-mailed her about the impending surgery. A veteran of several such biopsies herself, she had two pieces of advice. First, if I was wondering already about whether I should really stay off the ice for the whole week that she knew my doctor would recommend, the answer was yes. That admonition made me smile. It's the tough-skater intense determination that I adore in her. A cliché in coaching and skater interviews involves "attacking" the elements of your skating. She visibly does; that's one reason I find her skating so hot to watch. I was flattered that she knew I needed a little lecture about heeding the doctor's orders. (Actually, the doctor's assistant charged with telling me what to expect gave me a different example: "no vacuuming." It was a convenient illustration of literally the least of my concerns.)

Mary's second bit of advice fit into the tough-girl genre, too. She told me to think of the biopsy scars as battle scars. That one I couldn't even pretend to do, despite so much to help me along: the tough-girl spin on scars already in my repertoire; the cultural commonplace of the cancer "battle"; and my prior assumptions about the feminist models I would emulate in related circumstances. Once the prospect became less abstract, I knew immediately that, should the diagnosis require mastectomy, I'd be no Deena Metzger, the woman defiantly posing open-armed and single breasted in Hella Hamid's iconic 1978 photograph of her, now sometimes known as *The Warrior*. Nor could I even begin to live up to the example of Audre Lorde. Widely credited and associated with the warrior metaphor, she took it far beyond the political position now most commonly linked to it, a feminist defiance of patriarchal beauty standards:

For me, my scars are an honorable reminder that I may be a casualty in the cosmic war against radiation, animal fat, air pollution, McDonald's hamburgers and Red Dye No. 2, but the fight is still going on, and I am still part of it. I refuse to have my scars hidden or trivialized behind lambs wool or silicone gel. I refuse to be reduced in my own eyes or in the eyes of others from warrior to mere victim.³

I was stuck, in contrast, where Lorde puts Eudora, the troubled if knowledgeable character who bore the author's own scars in her 1982 "biomythography" *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. Eudora, Audre's older lover, finds her scars "hard to take . . . Not dashing or romantic." It's Audre who calls them a "mark of the Amazon," insists on making love "in the light," and finds herself, through her relationship with Eudora,

growing into “a woman connecting with other women in an intricate, complex, and ever-widening network of exchanging strengths.”⁴ That’s precisely the network I caught myself wanting to run from, or at least toward the part of it that embraced feminist cleavage.

Little Knives, Bigger Problems

Skating on little knives. Biopsy scars made me revisit what, in neologizing homage to the term “bootylicious” popularized by the musical group Destiny’s Child, I’ve come to think of as a taste for the perilicious: a certain relish in a kind of risk taking that is delicious to survive and delectable to narrate.⁵ I’d always been somewhat embarrassed about my urge to concoct a studlier narrative for figure skating. It made me feel like the idiot that marketers probably had in mind when they decided to sell to skaters little knit gloves under the name HandGards, despite their inability to protect hands from much more than the cold. I know figure skating is plenty hard; why should I care who else does? Worse, what foolish behavior might I undertake in the quest to prove it to myself or to others? The more often I deferred admitting injury, got on the ice even when my body hurt, ignored the familiar twinges signaling use turning to overuse, or skipped the weekly recovery day that athletic wisdom generally recommends—and the more I paid attention to other athletes pushing through pain—the more pride in injury seemed like a slippery slope in the direction of lunatic risk and recklessness about permanent damage. A student once introduced himself on the first day of a seminar by proudly announcing his one hundred trips to the emergency room, many caused by injuries incurred trying to recreate stunts from MTV’s aptly named show *Jackass*. The fact that I had come even to fathom his delight disturbed me. Besides, posturing about figure skating’s toughness inevitably panders, if indirectly, to the sexism and sexist-related homophobia that contributes mightily to figure skating’s reputation as a lightweight endeavor in the first place.

Looking back and forth between the skate scars and the biopsy scars did not eliminate my appetite for the perilicious. It did, however, illuminate nicely, I think, some of the complicated ways that gender and economics figure into risk, choice, and consequences. I take them up further in the next three essays.