

*Lee Ann Roripaugh*

## Derby Dreams

### 1. *Kansas City Bomber*

Of course, *Kansas City Bomber* is completely to blame. Raquel Welch, in the role of roller derby queen K. C. Carr—all honey-colored hair and velocity, all shiny nylon and striped tube socks—fiercely caroms around the tilted edges of a banked roller derby track. She jabs and bumps and collides and brawls—matter-of-factly jumping over the fallen bodies of derby girls downed on the track. She illicitly charges off the bench and clobbers “Horrible Hank” Hopkins with a mop. She fights dirty. During the *Star Spangled Banner*, she snaps her gum and rakishly winks at two of her love-struck female fans. That’s how we know she’s one tough cookie.

It’s 1972, the second Golden Age of derby. The relatively nascent National Organization for Women is campaigning to secure passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which bars discrimination on the basis of sex. The National Women’s Political Caucus is formed the year before, and in 1973, the Supreme Court will affirm a woman’s right to privacy in *Roe v. Wade*. 1972’s popular movies include *The Godfather*, *Deepthroat*, and *Last Tango in Paris*. Watergate unfolds. Atari releases PONG. *Cosmopolitan*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Ms. Magazine* simultaneously show up in our house, on

loan from the Albany County Public Library in Laramie, Wyoming, with apparently little or no cognitive dissonance whatsoever. It’s 1972, and Adrienne Rich opens her poem “Planetarium” with the shape-shiftingly transgressive image of “[a] woman in the shape of a monster / a monster in the shape of a woman / the skies are full of them.” Later on in this poem, written for unacknowledged astronomer Caroline Herschel, Rich writes, “I have been standing all my life in the / direct path of a battery of signals / the most accurately transmitted most / untranslatable language in the universe.”

As a mixed-race Nisei daughter, I know, even from a very early age, the things I’m supposed to want for myself. I take ballet and piano. I’m supposed to get a PhD. I should want to become a doctor. Femininity is obligatory, but I’m also not supposed to be too silly or girly or frilly if I want to be taken seriously. My secret aspirations for myself are darker, closeted, and much more incoherent, however. I want to drive a fire truck. Or become a stripper. I’m not even ten yet, but I already feel myself butting up against expectations and obligations that seem to come attached de facto to race and gender. But I don’t want to get stuck

being a bookish, awkward, nerdy half-Asian kid. I aspire to serious badassery. And so the night I finally see *Kansas City Bomber* on my parents' black and white TV, three or four years after its theater release, I find that it magically articulates an unnamed desire—a desire that hybridizes the battery of conflicting cultural signals, the bifurcated impulses of fireman and stripper, into something tangible and coherent: a dream of becoming a roller derby queen.

That Christmas, I lobby hard for roller skates, and although the ones I get are, disappointingly, the strap-on kind that buckle over my tennis shoes, I skate around and around and around my parents' unfinished basement, viciously hip-checking my imaginary opponents.

## 2. *A Brief and Much-Needed Letter to My Fourth-Grade Self*

Dear Fourth-Grade Self:

Since this is about the time when you begin to feel particularly fucked in the head about body image, and race, and orientation, and gender, I want you to know that eventually there will be an all-Asian derby team called Rice, who will bout with an all-Mexican derby team called Beans. Eventually there will be Asian derby queens, with names like Kamikaze Kim and Rice Rocket. Your secret derby name for your inner derby girl will be Bruise Lee.

Back to the Future-ishly Yours,

Me

## 3. *Rink Rash*

Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for woman more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society.

—Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken:  
Writing as Re-Vision”

Years later, when I watch *Kansas City Bomber* again, I'm surprised at the things I've either misremembered, or blocked, from my memory of the film. For example, I remembered K. C. Carr as a sexy badass—one who makes good by the end of the movie as a result of her skating and brawling superpowers. But as it turns out, K. C. isn't even a derby queen entirely by choice—rather, she's forced into it through the desperate circumstances of being a divorced mother under economic duress. I forgot that K. C. had children (including a tough-talking roller-skating urchin of a daughter played by a young Jodie Foster). I completely blocked many of the scenes that took place off the track, in which K. C.'s drably garbed in cardigans, pleated skirts, pantyhose, and pumps—looking not so much like a roller derby queen, but more like a steno from the typing pool. When K. C. visits her home in Fresno, her strident mother, who takes care of K. C.'s children, nags and shames and emotionally bullies K. C., while K. C.'s son rejects her timid overtures to bond with him and runs away from her.

As it turns out, the movie is, in many respects, an unsettling exploration of the vulnerability of commodified and commodifiable bodies. The skaters work under constant threat of serious injury, worrying about

how their aging bodies will hold up against younger players. As in the world of professional wrestling, when these bodies are used up, they're discarded. Aging alcoholic derby diva Jackie Burdett is terrified of being dethroned by K. C., which causes her to sink to increasingly belligerent depths of alcohol-fueled depression. Similarly, "Horrible Hank" Hopkins, also aging, and possibly concussion-addled as well, frets about ways to increase his worth to the team—scheming up performative spectacles in which he antagonizes the crowd by making pig noises.

Female bodies are rendered doubly vulnerable—their participation in a gender-transgressive spectacle seemingly codes them as sexually available objects. Following a bout, for example, K. C. and a teammate fight off would-be rapists (male derby fans who first solicit autographs from them) outside the derby venue. Likewise, when K. C. is summarily traded from the Kansas City Bombers to the Portland Loggers after losing a grudge match to Big Bertha Baglioni, she's revealed to be a mere pawn in the hands of repugnantly smug derby impresario and league owner, Burt Henry. Immediately following her move to Portland, Burt plies K. C. with a nice dinner and the impressive view from his fancy bachelor pad, after which K. C. compliantly becomes his lover. In classically abusive fashion, he systematically isolates K. C. from her friends and support system—trading her roommate Lovey to a team in Denver, and firing her friend "Horrible Hank." Burt promises to make K. C. a roller derby star on TV but tells her she won't be able to bring her children along. "I'm so lonely," K. C. sighs, and Burt tells her that he loves her, inasmuch as he's capable of loving anyone.

And so it seems the K. C. Carr I selectively remember from the movie is in many ways a wishful

construction on my part—possibly the K. C. Carr that I wanted or needed her to be.

#### 4. *Derby Girls of the Corn*

Bemidji Babe City Rollers  
Bizman Bombshells  
Fargo Moorhead Furies  
Grand Forx Sugarbeaters  
Iron Range Maidens  
Moose Lake Mafia  
Nodak Knockouts  
Norfolk Bruizin' Bettys  
Oskaloosa Mayhem  
Sioux Falls Killa Beez

#### 5. *Derby Gurlisque*

Jump-cut to the Long Lines Family Rec Center in Sioux City, Iowa, March 2012, where the Sioux City Roller Dames have a bout with the Sioux Falls Roller Dollz. Derby, which originated in the Midwest, has gone through several revivals, and the most recent flat-track renaissance has come home to roost once again in fly-over country. Throughout the Great Plains, roller dolls (and dames and broads and vixens) with sassy derby names and muscular thighs, glittered and brightly tattooed, are migrating every weekend like glorious birds on buses from bout to bout, rec center to rec center, across rivers and fields and corn.

In shorts and skirts, in zombie and pirate make-up, in fishnet and spandex, these dames and dolls have gone third-wave. Their strapping rough-and-tumble toughness brazenly deconstructs retrograde notions of gender. At the same time, their over-the-top costuming simultaneously reappropriates and embraces the grrrly, the femme, while underscoring its performativity, its

constructedness. They're serious athletes in drag. They bring to bear the aesthetic influences of punk rock, rockabilly, and burlesque. They're body positive and sex positive. They're both butch and femme. They are fluid, transgressive, genderqueer.

Postmodern derby girls destabilize and resist easy commodification through proffering burlesqued performances of their derby alter egos—personas that offer the audience a series of slippery signifiers that mock as much as they titillate. Using these constructed characters, they reappropriate, take control of, and author the terms of their commodification for their own pleasure and benefit. This is particularly evident in the derby names they give to themselves. This power to name, and the ways in which the rollergirls name themselves—names that revel in sexual and linguistic play, that gleefully dismantle conventions of gender, femininity, sexuality, and power—similarly tantalize and mock: Queen Elizabitch, Shimmy Hoffa, Yoko Oh No You Didn't, Felony Convixen, Betsy Wrecksie, Morgan LeFaetal.

Unlike the banked-track derby of the 1970s represented in *Kansas City Bomber*, 21st-century derby's spectacle resides not in out-and-out choreographed brawling on the track (reminiscent, in many respects, of the moves and antics of professional wrestling), but

rather in burlesque flair combined with a more serious attentiveness to the actual sport of the bout itself. Derby girls train long and hard. It's a sport that requires endurance, strength, mad skating skillz, and strategy. Women's Flat Track Derby Association penalties are strict for fighting, tripping, elbow jabbing, back blocking, and head blocking, and team members are required to wear helmets, pads, and guards. Still, there are bone-crunching falls, and massive pile-ups. The skaters are fast and fierce and fearless. My favorites include rangy jammers Jackie O'Smashus and Julia Wild, as well as the quick vicious pixies, Funsie and Applicious. I am also partial to the debauchable milkmaid-esque blockers, Red Thunder and The Annihilatrix.

They are like my wishful, misremembered construction of K. C. Carr. They are the embodiment of who I wished to be as an awkward and troubled girl, skating around and around by herself in her parents' basement in Laramie, Wyoming, and I love them for it.

#### *6. Afterimage: Heartbeat of the Pulsar*

In the derby photographs I take, the star-helmeted jammers, in the rec center's glaring yellow neon, are hot circling streaks of whiz and blur—*every impulse of light exploding / from the core / as life flies out of us*—like pictures of Ferris wheels at night. 🌸