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This article undertakes a qualitative exploration of women’s and men’s songs in the skydiving community in order to explore the intersection of gender and sexuality in this context. Analyses reveal that men’s songs constrain the transformative potential of women in skydiving by trivializing, marginalizing, and sexualizing them. Further, they reinforce male hegemony in skydiving through the construction of a hyperheterosexual masculinity. Meanwhile, women’s songs resist male hegemony in the sport, laying claim to discursive and physical space. One central strategy in this resistance is the construction of a strong heterosexual femininity, thereby asserting a sexual subjectivity neither defined nor controlled by men. This resistance, however, shores up a particular version of heterosexual femininity that contributes to women’s trivialization and sexualization in this setting.

Introduction

The relatively recent gains in popularity of alternative sports have come at an interesting historical juncture. At a time when women are making (limited) inroads into the male-dominated world of mainstream sport, several ostensibly gender-neutral alternative sports have proliferated. Paradoxically, although many participants in these sports claim that the activities are structured in opposition to the values of mainstream sport, practices and rituals in these settings often reproduce hierarchies privileging men and particular kinds of masculinity (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Beal, 1996; Wheaton and Tomlinson, 1998). This article draws on ethnographic research and explores textual constructions of gender and sexuality in
one such sport. Specifically, the article undertakes a qualitative exploration of sub-cultural texts to explore the intersection of gender and sexuality in the context of skydiving.

Analyses of men’s songs reveal that they constrain the transformative potential of women in skydiving by trivializing, marginalizing, and sexualizing them. Further, they reinforce male hegemony in skydiving through the construction of a hyperheterosexual masculinity. Meanwhile, women’s songs resist male hegemony in the sport, laying claim to discursive and physical space. One central strategy in this resistance is the construction of a strong heterosexual femininity, thereby asserting a sexual subjectivity neither defined nor controlled by men. This resistance, however, shores up a particular version of heterosexual femininity that contributes to women’s trivialization and sexualization in this setting. This article sheds light on the ways in which these texts actively construct gender and sexuality in the gender regime of a sport in which women and men participate together.

The Skydiving Community

Recreational skydiving was born in the post World War II period and was largely the project of exmilitary jumpers (Laurendeau and Wamsley, 1998; for a discussion of the history of parachuting prior to its birth as a recreational activity, see Laurendeau, 2000). The early organization of the sport reflected a rough-and-tumble masculinity, with heavy equipment, hard landings, and a hard-partying atmosphere outside of jumping hours (Laurendeau and Wamsley; Lyng and Snow, 1986). During this period, what Lyng and Snow call the “Eat-Fuck-Skydive” orientation dominated skydiving. This terminology indicates both the importance of skydiving in the lives of jumpers and the centrality of sexual practices in the social organization of the skydiving community. Though women were certainly part of the partying outside of jumping hours, they were severely marginalized as skydivers (Lyng and Snow). These authors assert that from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, the skydiving subculture went from one that was dominated by sexuality and hedonism to one that was largely countercultural.

Despite this shift in orientation, sexism still informed the perception of women in skydiving. Arnold (1976) conducted interviews with skydivers and noted overt sexism in the subculture, with a number of male instructors and participants distrusting women in the sport or considering them incapable of developing the same level of skill as men. The next shift in the sport was towards a performance orientation. From the early 1980s to the present, skydiving has become more like mainstream sports in terms of institutionalized coaching and skill development, widespread (though not often serious) competition, and technical and technological innovation. In the last 8 or 10 years, some jumpers have tried to break this mold to some extent, experimenting with new styles of skydiving that emphasize freedom and flow of movement. This experimental undercurrent points to something of a revival of the countercultural orientation of the 1970s.

Consistent throughout these different periods in the development of skydiving is the strong party atmosphere that dominates nonjumping hours, particularly at events called “boogies.” Boogies are events that draw skydivers from many different geographical locations together for a weekend or longer. Both regular skydiving and boogies take place at a drop zone, which usually consists of little
more than a runway, some hangar space, perhaps another building or two, and an area in which skydivers land their parachutes. Jumping-related activities dominate daylight hours at the drop zone. Whether practicing a skydive on the ground before the jump (referred to as a “dirt dive”), packing one’s parachute, registering for a jump, or actually on an airplane, jumpers spend much of the day occupied by activities directly related to jumping. At some point in the day, however, jumping ceases, either because the sun has gone down or because the weather is so unsuitable for jumping that there is no chance of any further jumps that day. At this point the “beer light” comes on. There might or might not be a physical beer light, but the announcement of the beer light signals that jumping is done for the day, and alcohol consumption may commence. The party atmosphere that often ensues is described in greater detail later in this article.

In terms of understanding who skydivers are, the results from a 2002 survey conducted by the United States Parachute Association (U.S.P.A.) provide a snapshot of members of the association (United States Parachute Association, n.d.). As of 2002, there were over 33,000 members of the U.S.P.A. Of survey respondents, just over 15% are women, and 58% of the members are between 30 and 49 years of age. Military personnel still represent a significant percentage of skydivers at just over 10%. The five best-represented occupations after the military are business management, building trades, the computer industry, engineering, and medicine. Given the expense of the sport, it comes as no surprise that there is a skew towards the upper-middle class among participants. Unfortunately, the survey results do not include any data on participants’ race or ethnicity.

### Gender and Sexuality

Connell (2002) asserts that social institutions have gender regimes, which he defines as “regular set[s] of arrangements about gender” including such things as who is recruited to play particular roles, “what kinds of social divisions [are] recognized, . . . how emotional relations [are] conducted, . . . and how these institutions [are] related to others” (p. 53). Gender regimes form the “structure of relations” within which individuals make choices about how to do gender. These structures then shape and constrain individual practices, defining the “possibilities and consequences” of action (Connell, p. 55). Gender regimes, Connell points out, are embedded in the gender order of society, which is a wider pattern of enduring gender relations. They are not, however, simply reflective of the gender order of which they are a part. Rather, they “usually correspond to the overall gender order, but may depart from it. This is important for change. Some institutions change quickly, others lag” (Connell, p. 54). Change comes about through practices that challenge (or at least fail to perfectly reproduce) dominant structures (Connell).

It is particularly interesting to examine the construction of gender in a sport in which women and men participate together. As Messner (1988) points out, sport is a critical site for the construction and maintenance of male superiority, where the female athlete becomes “contested ideological terrain.” In some sports, there is tremendous potential for upsetting this dominant order. When women and men participate and compete together, there is a serious threat to the oppositional binary wherein men’s and women’s athletic achievements are understood as fundamentally different phenomena grounded in the natural differences between “the
“sexes” (Kane, 1995). In these circumstances, there is bound to be evidence that not all men are better than all women, even in sports appropriated by men, a notion that Kane conceptualizes as “sport as a continuum” (Kane, 1995). This evidence often fails to come to light, however, because of “mechanisms of continuum containment” employed as forms of counterresistance (Kane, 1995, pp. 194, 206). In light of the transformative potential of these sports, it is imperative that researchers empirically examine the gender regimes and the ways in which male hegemony is continually contested and defended.

Recently, researchers have brought to light a number of important theoretical insights that inform current approaches to studying gender. For the purposes of this discussion, the most important of these is the growing recognition that gender is not the only (and, in some contexts, perhaps not even the most important) marker of difference. Research that fails to attend to the mutual constitution of gender, race, class, sexuality, and other markers is now challenged for inattention to the complexities of individuals’ social locations (see Schippers, 2000). Privileging gender as an analytic focus over other “systems of alterity” impedes our understanding of how gender, class, sexuality, race, and other markers of difference work together to produce particular hierarchical relations (Marshall, 2000, p. 49). Even as we attend to these other dimensions, though, we run into difficulty over who is being represented and how that representation plays out. For instance, one of the central problems of early gender theorizing (the tendency to treat gender in binary terms) has made its way into other areas of theory and research. Some theorizing about sexuality, for instance, has been accused of leaving “in place the heterosexual/homosexual binary as a master framework for constructing the self, sexual knowledge, and social institutions” (Seidman, 1995, p. 126).

The intersection of sexuality and gender is particularly salient for this project. Like gender scholars, many researchers examining sexuality now conceptualize sexuality not as a biological imperative but as “socially constructed, fluid and malleable, . . . [and] culturally and institutionally regulated” (Gagné and Tewksbury, 2002, p. 2). That is to say that sexualities are ongoing and fluid constructions rather than stable identities around which action is organized (Kehily and Nayak, 1997). Initially, this insight led researchers to examine the construction of other sexualities, leaving heterosexuality unproblematized as an implicit reference category. Recently, though, social scientists have made heterosexuality a focus of investigation, examining the ways its contours are constructed, challenged, and defended (Gagné and Tewksbury). In addition, many researchers “conceptualize sexuality as not simply one feature of broader gender relations but as a separate organizing principle in its own right and equally central to the workings of power as gender” (Schippers, 2000, p. 748).

Not only are sexuality and gender both important in understanding hierarchical relations in social settings, but they intersect in the ways social actors negotiate their gendered and sexual identities. As Schippers (2000) outlines,

Sexuality and gender are separate organizing features of social relations but intersect by mutually constituting, reinforcing, and naturalizing each other. Gender relations . . . naturalize, reinforce, and support sexuality, which includes the display, enactment, and meanings of sexual desire and sexual identities. Likewise, sexuality simultaneously naturalizes, reinforces, and supports gender. (p. 748)
That is to say that actors negotiate both gender and sexuality but not in isolation from one another. Gender and sexuality intersect and mutually constitute each other, as we have also seen is the case in recent theorizing about gender, class, and race (Schippers, 2000). By examining the intersection of sexuality and gender, we can explore the nuances of how both gender and sexuality are done in particular sporting contexts. Price and Parker (2003) point to this theoretical interplay between gender and sexuality when they argue that “heterosexuality may be framed as a discursive production of the regulatory gender models through which it is naturalized via the performative repetition of normative (dominant) gender identities” (p. 111). Gagné and Tewksbury (2002) elaborate on this in their discussion of gendered sexualities. They suggest that it is important to examine “heterosexuality as a social construction that is accomplished through gender, as well as gender as it is accomplished through heterosexuality” (Gagné and Tewksbury, pp. 3-4). In doing so, they argue, researchers might discover that the intersection between gender and sexuality is far more complex than previously thought, and that power might be exercised and/or challenged in complex ways at this juncture. This approach draws on a central assumption of third-wave feminism, that “it is possible for women to use sexuality as a means of exercising power” (Gagné and Tewksbury, p. 7).

Recently, several researchers have attended to the ways in which texts actively contribute to how gender and sexuality are done in particular settings. These studies have primarily examined images (e.g., Carlisle-Duncan, 1990; Pedersen, 2002) or written texts (e.g., Jamieson, 1998; Pirinen, 1997) that circulate in the mass media. Some, however, have stepped away from mainstream media texts to explore other works, such as youth fiction (Kane, 1998). Collectively, this work leads us to the conclusion that these texts contribute to sporting gender regimes that regularly marginalize, trivialize, and sexualize women. Further, they construct hierarchies within the broad categories of men and women, normalizing particular masculinities and femininities in sport at the same time that they construct particular sexualities.

Texts that do not circulate widely but constitute important elements of particularly tightly bound groups, unfortunately, have received little serious attention (notable exceptions include Schacht, 1996; Wheatley, 1994). These texts provide useful windows through which we can examine the gender regimes of particular social groups because they embed particular understandings of gender in social structures, which then shape and constrain the practices of individuals (Connell, 2002). Like media texts, subcultural texts are produced within a particular set of understandings of gender and sexual relations. In the case of these texts, though, this set of understandings is not shared widely. Rather, it is structured, reinforced, and/or challenged within a relatively tightly knit group whose members have regular contact with one another. Like mass media, these subcultural texts challenge and/or shore up dominant understandings of femininity and masculinity, though with a shorter reach (Wheatley, 1994). Wheatley, for instance, suggests that many men’s rugby songs rely heavily on violent imagery that objectifies and victimizes women through a hyperheterosexual discourse. Schacht (1996) describes similar objectification in men’s rugby songs, and elaborates that the performance of these texts is tantamount to a form of gang rape. These texts and performances become structural features of a culture in which shared meaning, rituals, and symbols inform
participants’ understandings of themselves, their bodies, and their relationships with others.

**Research Methods**

In generating data for this research, I drew on ethnographic methods, including 6 months of participant observation (participant as observer) at various western Canadian locations, as well as 37 in-depth interviews with current participants in the sport. At the time of the research, I was a full participant in the sport. Before the onset of fieldwork, I had been skydiving for approximately 4 years. I spent the 1998 skydiving season participating in jumping and social activities at two drop zones. Because of weather, a season on the Canadian prairies generally lasts from April or May to October. During this particular season, my first jump was in mid-April and my last in early November. Most weekends, and occasionally during the week, I spent time at one of the drop zones or attending one of a number of boogies. During these months, I completed approximately 130 skydives and attended several get-togethers away from the drop zone. Housewarming parties and bar nights, for example, are important events in the social network of skydivers. I made field notes after each of these encounters.

One period in the field is especially germane to the current discussion. During my fieldwork, I attended one particularly important boogie, considered the boogie each year by many skydivers in western Canada and the northwestern United States. At this boogie, I encountered a number of social practices and rituals, including the song-singing ritual from which the texts that form the subject of this article are drawn. I secured a copy of the men’s songbook and later examined the 13 songs therein. Understanding texts as “sites of ideological struggles for meaning,” I decided to analyze the men’s songs for “traces of struggle, such as gaps, contradictions, and oppositions” (Pirinen, 1997, p. 292). I selected the four songs in which gender and sexuality were central themes. I then investigated these in depth for themes and issues related to gender and sexuality, working from the understanding of texts as actively shaping and organizing action in a social setting (Watson, 1997). Similar to Pirinen (1997), I considered what sorts of representations were fashioned in the songs’ narratives, and the ways in which these representations construct heterosexuality, legitimate particular masculinities, and privilege them over others and over femininities.

At this point, I decided to compare these themes and issues with those contained in the women’s songs. At my request, a contact provided me with electronic copies of women’s songs. I examined each of the 35 songs and again selected those centered on gender and sexuality. I then scrutinized the resulting 15 songs, comparing and contrasting their themes with those from the men’s songs. In contrast to textual analyses that codify and tally particular elements of the text or those that ethnographically analyze the production and reception of texts, I approached the skydivers’ songs as “active social phenomena” (Watson, 1997; for a more detailed discussion of different methods of analyzing texts, see Silverman, 1993). That is, I did not understand these songs as static phenomena circulating in the social world of skydivers. Rather, the jumpers who wrote the songs were informed by the gender regime in which they were embedded. In turn, these songs and their yearly performance actively construct elements of the structure of relations within which members of the skydiving community do gender and sexuality. As such, I
analyzed the texts interpretively for the themes and assumptions that were present, as well as for those conspicuously absent.

For the purposes of this article, I selected three songs from each songbook that illustrate the different ways in which these texts construct gender and sexuality. It is important to note that the songs examined are from one boogie, and most of them were written locally and do not circulate widely among skydivers elsewhere. Further, this boogie is one of many that take place each year. Moreover, these boogies generally have a different dynamic than one might see, for example, at a weekend drop zone or a major drop zone in Arizona or California that draws many skydivers who train quite seriously. I am not claiming, therefore, that the processes I describe in this article are perfectly representative of what transpires elsewhere in the skydiving community. Instead, this article delves into particular social processes and calls for further investigation to explore the extent to which the texts described shape skydivers’ understandings and constructions of the gender and sexuality of themselves and others. Further research into social practices at different kinds of drop zones would be valuable.

The Boogie

Each year, for approximately 10 days in the heart of summer, several hundred skydivers descend on a couple of acres of land with one runway and couple of small, slightly run-down buildings. Jumpers trickle in over the first weekend, get reacquainted, and enjoy having the airplanes virtually at their disposal. As the second weekend approaches, more jumpers arrive each hour, and tents, campers, and large recreational vehicles pop up in every available space outside the landing area. The vast majority of jumpers in the state in which this event is held, and a great number from surrounding states and provinces, have come to this boogie at one time or another, and hundreds make the trip on a yearly basis. In fact, a significant number of jumpers curtail their skydiving at their home drop zone in order to save money to attend this boogie.

Many jumpers consider this particular boogie a major skydiving event at which one can see old friends, jump out of large aircraft, and perhaps most importantly, party extensively. At this boogie, as at many others I attended, the partying was just as important as the jumping activities. A few jumpers, in fact, spent little of their time jumping, choosing instead to invest more of their time and energy in some of the more social aspects of the boogie. Several, for instance, no longer bring their skydiving equipment to the boogie. Instead, they spent several days hanging out with old friends, as well as participating in some of the rituals that take place each year at this boogie. The party atmosphere draws a certain part of the general skydiving population. Jumpers who are less drawn to the social elements of the sport (very serious competitive jumpers, for instance) rarely, if ever, attend this boogie. This also means that the demographics at this boogie vary slightly from those in skydiving generally. It is of note that the proportion of women at the event is higher than in skydiving generally. By my own estimates, as well as those of some key informants, women represented perhaps one third of the population at this boogie.

For the purposes of this article, the most important element of the party atmosphere alluded to above is the yearly ritual in which the women’s choir (the “Crack Choir”) and the men’s choir (the “Cock Chorus”) perform. On the second
weekend of the boogie, the men’s and women’s performances take place on Friday and Saturday night, respectively. The performance of the Crack Choir has been a regular practice at this boogie for over 2 decades. Originally, my informants tell me, men sang “women bashing” songs and the women sang in reply. At some point, the men’s songs faded, but the performances of the Crack Choir remained a yearly feature of the boogie. Each year roughly 40–50 women, or about one third of the women present, participate in the choir.

Women who have been coming to the boogie for years take the lead in organizing the rehearsal and performance and spend many hours in the days leading up to the performance in preparation (e.g., making Jell-O® shooters for the rehearsal and performance). On the big night, the choir gathers for their one and only rehearsal before the performance. At the rehearsal, organizers fill participants’ stomachs and pockets with Jell-O shooters. The choir then practices their songs in a rather raucous atmosphere. As one woman put it, “you can’t feed a bunch of women 14 Jell-O shooters each and then ask us to behave!” (Christine).

Eventually, the women make their way to the steps of the drop-zone bar, filling the stairs, and spilling out in front of the bar. At this point, they have the full attention of virtually everyone on the drop zone. The men, as well as the women who are not singing, clamor for a good view of the proceedings. A few people occupy the deck behind the choir, some find seats on the roof of the bar, and most stand elbow to elbow on the grass immediately in front of the choir. As the women perform their songs, there is a somewhat restless air to the audience. Although most women and a few men listen respectfully, a number of men issue periodic chants of “show us your tits!” This aggressive chanting sometimes interrupts the performance despite the attempts of a few women and men to keep the audience in check. At some point late in the performance, though, a few women in the choir reward the efforts of these aggressive men, spontaneously flashing their breasts to the crowd. The choir closes the performance with two or three songs in tribute to those who have died in the sport. As such, the general tone at the end of the performance is quite reserved.

The men, meanwhile, re-formed their choir in 1994. Their songbook notes that “the Cock Chorus was never intended to compete with the Crack Choir but to pay homage to all the women, past, present, and future, who have performed so well over the years.” That the men are slightly less enthusiastic performers in this ritual is indicated by the proportion of men participating; the Cock Chorus consists of approximately 40 men, representing only about one in every eight men at the boogie on this night. Similar to the women, the men find a rehearsal location to practice (and drink) a couple of hours before their performance. After the rehearsal, the group makes its way toward the drop-zone bar and sets up in a configuration very similar to the one the women will occupy the following night. Again, the crowd gathers round, though with a rather more subdued vibe than for the Crack Choir. Some men in the crowd carry on conversations with each other, while others sit and enjoy the performance. Most women, meanwhile, listen with a fair degree of respect, enjoying the humor in the songs and the relatively poor singing abilities of the men. There are a few women who shout “show us your dicks” periodically during the performance, but these distractions come nowhere near the level seen among the audience for the women’s performance. Moreover, these shouts are clearly a replication of the men’s chants, and display less conviction and insistence than the men’s cries. Just as importantly, these chants rarely, if ever,
result in male nudity. I now turn to a consideration of some of the songs performed in this context.

The Cock Chorus

The Cock Chorus Songbook contains a number of songs making light of poor performance (generally) in the sport, skydiving deaths, and the performance of the chorus itself. One of the significant themes in the songbook is the sexual objectification of women. The overall pattern of these songs resembles that prevalent in the misogynist songs that often characterize male rugby culture, including hypersexual and sometimes violent imagery, with women objectified through their relationship to heterosexual men. The first song I will explore here is entitled “And Then I Poked Her.”

“And Then I Poked Her” (sung to the tune of “Then He Kissed Me”)
Well she walked in the bar and she asked me if I wanted to poke,
I could tell by the look in her eyes that it wasn’t a joke,
So we walked back to my tent, and in 5 minutes I was spent,
And so I poked her.
Well, every time I poked her she couldn’t wait to get poked again.
She used me so often that I finally wished it would end.
Then she sat up on my face, just like it was her natural place,
She smiled and told me that her name was Grace,
And then I poked her.
I poked her in places that I had never poked before;
I poked her in places so tight that my penis got sore.
The next day she said, “Let’s go and make a naked skydive.”
Well, no one suspected that we both wouldn’t come back alive,
She never cut her bag-lock away; I searched for her all through the day,
Slowly
Late that night, I found where she lay,
And then I poked her.
And then I poked her.
Really Slow
And then I poked her.

“And Then I Poked Her” is certainly one of the most graphic pieces in this songbook. Two recurring themes are important here. First, women are positioned as ineffective skydivers. The only mention of a jump is a naked skydive by Grace and the narrator. With absolutely no description of the skydive itself, we hear only that Grace has died because of her inability to cut away a high-speed malfunction of her main parachute, the first step in safely deploying a reserve parachute. As a result, she suffers the ultimate sanction. Second, the song characterizes women as hypersexual creatures, and men as willing, though somewhat ambivalent, accomplices. Grace aggressively pursues sexual conquest with the narrator, exercising power in this heterosexual encounter. The interlude is stripped of any tenderness by its framing as a “poke.” One poke is not enough for this sexual being, as she relentlessly carries on with the encounter. She is certainly the sexual aggressor,
Laurendeau's sitting on the narrator's face, and using him beyond his own threshold of sexual interest. The song illustrates the construction of gender and heterosexuality and the negotiation of power through the narrator's discomfort with his role as the sexual prey. Tired by the seemingly unending sexual encounter(s), our narrator continues to bend to the will of this strong woman despite his own physical discomfort.

Schacht (1996), in his investigation of misogynist practices in men's rugby, speculates that men discursively construct women who resist their subordination. Powerful images of femininity do not undermine the importance of the masculine, he suggests, provided that the feminine is eventually subordinated (Schacht, 1996, p. 562). This subordination is vividly realized in the last stanza of the song. After the fateful skydive, the narrator dutifully searches for Grace. When he finds her late at night, he commits necrophilia, reclaiming power through another heterosexual act, albeit a deviant one. One wonders if this final transgression is symbolic payback for Grace emasculating him by using her sexuality to exercise power over him. At any rate, the construction of heterosexuality in this song constitutes a central element of the framing of masculinity in the text. Heterosexual conquest is the avenue by which Grace attempts to exercise power, and also that by which she is ultimately subjugated.

In some ways the second song seems to be more innocuous than the first because the content is not as obviously violent or offensive. On closer inspection, however, "Thong Bikinis" proves to be quite telling in terms of gender construction.

"Thong Bikinis" (sung to the tune of "Jingle Bells")
Oh, thong bikinis, halter tops, showing off their bods,
That's what drop zone women wear, and why we have such rods.
Oh, hooters, headlights, sets, and jugs,
Cleavage gives us fits,
Yet you act like you're disturbed
When we call out for tits.
Running to the plane, to fly up in the sky,
The dive was in my mind, but then what did I spy?
Two large mammalian breasts, covered with band-aids,
Leaning over to pack her chute, a young sky-diving maid.
Oh, thong bikinis, halter tops, showing off their goodies,
That's what drop zone women wear, and why we have such woodies.
Oh, hooters, headlights, sets, and jugs,
Cleavage gives us fits,
Yet you act like you're disturbed
When we call out for tits.

"Thong Bikinis" includes one relatively straightforward theme similar to those found in the other songs. This is the obvious heterosexual obsession with women's body parts. This has the effect of reducing women to their heterosexual attractiveness, essentially identifying them in relation to their cleavage. Through the construction of men's heterosexuality, women are framed as the other, and robbed of their subjectivity. They are understood to be at a drop zone participating in skydiving activities, but they are given no identity and are not described actually
taking part in a skydive or even getting on an airplane. More interestingly, however, “Thong Bikinis” is the only song that evokes a direct address to women. Whereas the other songs are all, in some ways, about fantasy scenarios, “Thong Bikinis” is about real issues that take place in the skydiving community. The lines, “yet you act like you’re disturbed when we call out for tits” seem to respond to women’s criticisms of and resistance to men’s attitudes and practices in skydiving. Beyond the specific criticisms of particular behaviors in skydiving, these lines appear to be part of an interpretive context that takes issue with larger (societal) discourses that are critical of (hetero)sexual objectification.

Further, the phrase “act like” is an interesting formulation that creates some uncertainty. This focuses the attention on the performance of disturbance and calls into question the authenticity of the anxiety. This creates a skeptical distance from women’s unease, thereby weakening the impact of women’s objections to men’s behavior. Women’s behavior is constructed as inconsistent: On the one hand, they walk around half naked between skydives; on the other, they have the audacity to complain when men ask to see their cleavage. If a woman chooses to show cleavage, she should expect and accept the harassing behaviors of men as a natural response. The song constructs it as hypocritical for women to show skin and then complain about the attention they receive. If women tease, they should not hold back the “goodies.” In this we see the mutual constitution of gender and heterosexuality. Men’s heterosexual interest in women is framed as natural and based in common sense, a framing that constructs women as objects of aesthetic appeal rather than individuals with subjectivity. Further, women’s objections to men’s behaviors are dismissed out of hand, entrenching this version of heterosexuality through men’s power to define the situation.

The third song that I will consider here bears little direct relationship to the practice of skydiving. Again, though, it illustrates the construction of particular kinds of masculinity and heterosexuality.

“Two Osprey Jumpers” (sung to the tune of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home”)

Two Osprey jumpers crossed the line, taboo . . . taboo . . .
Two Osprey jumpers crossed the line, taboo . . . taboo . . .
Two Osprey jumpers crossed the line
TO FUCK THE WOMEN AND DRINK THE WINE! (growled loudly here, pirate-like)
Tabee Tabeye Tabilickee eye Tabilickee eye Taboo.

They came upon a wayside Inn, taboo . . . taboo . . .
They came upon a wayside Inn, taboo . . . taboo . . .
They came upon a wayside Inn,
AND KICKED THE FUCKING DOOR RIGHT IN! (pirates again)
Tabee Tabeye Tabilickee eye Tabilickee eye Taboo.

The innkeeper had a daughter fair, taboo . . . taboo . . .
The innkeeper had a daughter fair, taboo . . . taboo . . .
The innkeeper had a daughter fair,
WITH LONG BLONDE HAIR AND TITS TO THERE!
Tabee Tabeye Tabilickee eye Tabilickee eye Taboo.
They tied her to the leg of a bed, taboo . . .
They tied her to the leg of a bed, taboo . . .
They tied her to the leg of a bed,
AND FUCKED HER 'TILL SHE WAS DAMN NEAR DEAD!
Tabee Tabeye Tabilickee eye Tabilickee eye Taboo.

They drug her down a country lane, taboo . . .
They drug her down a country lane, taboo . . .
They drug her down a country lane,
AND FUCKED HER BACK TO LIFE AGAIN!
Tabee Tabeye Tabilickee eye Tabilickee eye Taboo.

Two Osprey jumpers went to Hell, taboo . . .
Two Osprey jumpers went to Hell, taboo . . .
Two Osprey jumpers went to Hell,
AND FUCKED THE DEVIL'S WIFE AS WELL!
Tabee Tabeye Tabilickee eye Tabilickee eye Taboo.

The moral of the story is, taboo . . .
The moral of the story is, taboo . . .
The moral of the story is,
NEVER GET TIED TO THE LEG OF A BED! (Garrulous pirate-like cheer)
Tabee Tabeye Tabilickee eye Tabilickee eye Taboo.

Like “And Then I Poked Her,” “Two Osprey Jumpers” serves to illustrate the way in which particular masculinities are constructed in direct opposition to inferior categories whose subordination is signified by the suffering of others. This song celebrates a particular kind of deviance associated with a tough, hostile, heterosexual masculinity. This is seen through the repetition of the word taboo, as well as repeated deviant actions of the main characters. Further, the pirate-like growling sets up associations with a strong, resilient masculinity that flies in the face of law and order. In contrast, the lyrics describe the first woman only by her heterosexual attractiveness. In the fantasy sequence, she is assaulted by not one but two men. The way these men exercise their power over her is through heterosexual conquest so complete that she nearly dies. When sent to Hell for their misdeeds, the men engage in further sexual exploits with the only other woman in the song—the devil’s wife! The final stanza of the song only serves to heighten the misogynist message, framing the innkeeper’s daughter as responsible for the assault because she allowed herself to be tied to the leg of the bed. Here, heterosexuality is again constructed as the avenue by which men wield power over women.

As researchers have described in other sporting settings, sexual stories and acts are pervasive and overt topics, reflecting the importance of embedded sexual narratives in social structures (Bricknell, 1999). For instance, according to the folklore at this boogie, on one occasion several years ago a woman performed fellatio on a man very publicly on the deck of the drop-zone bar. As jumpers tell the story, only the woman’s exploits are noteworthy; she chose to engage in such a public act. The man, on the other hand, is depicted as little more than a prop. Of course, he would accept oral sex, even in this public setting—he’s a (heterosexual) man. This narrative fosters the idea that men’s sexual needs are natural and beyond emotion. Men’s sex drives, because they are understood (i.e., constructed) as innate, are not problematized. As a result, women are made responsible for their own behaviors and for the responses of men.
In the song “Two Osprey Jumpers,” for instance, it is only natural that our two jumpers would, given the opportunity, want to tie any woman with substantial cleavage to the leg of a bed. She, understanding the implications of men’s sex drives, should not allow herself to be put in a compromising position. If she does, she should not be surprised to find herself raped to the brink of death then dragged down a country lane only to be “fucked . . . back to life again.” This line is also interesting in that it further illustrates the way in which women’s identities are realized in the song only through their relationships to heterosexual men. The secondary female character is identified only as the wife of the heterosexual devil. The main female character, meanwhile, is known only as the innkeeper’s daughter, and her revival, her very survival, is dependent upon her being “fucked” by the two heterosexual male characters. Through their heterosexual actions, the men hold the greatest form of power over her—the ability to grant life.

The Crack Choir

Some of the women’s songs playfully reference past events (a jump where everyone badly missed the landing target, for instance), others celebrate and/or poke fun at skydiving in general, and yet others pay homage to jumpers who have lost their lives in the sport. Fifteen of the 35 songs, though, focus on men in the sport and/or the relationship between men and women. Unlike the men’s songs described above, very few of these songs are about elaborate fantasy scenarios. In the two exceptions, no male character suffers physical pain or death. In fact, in both cases, the woman in the song is the focus, and her sexual promiscuity is highlighted. This theme will be addressed shortly. Here, I examine three songs that exemplify the differences between the men’s and women’s songs. The first of these is entitled “All-Girl Loads.”

“All-Girl Loads”

We’re coming, we’re coming, our Crack Choir band
On the fun side of jumping, we do take our stand
We don’t chew tobacco, because we do think
That chewing tobacco will grow you a dink!

Chorus

Hooray, hooray, for all-girl loads
All-girl loads, all-girl loads
Hooray, hooray, for all-girl loads
Cuz they put the fun back in jumping
We don’t wear tight jumpsuits because we know that
A skinny suit will only accent our fat
And can you imagine a sorrier sight
Than a skinny suit moulding to our cellulite?

Chorus

We never do dirt dives because we surmise
That dirt dives will only detract from surprise
And how could a dirt dive improve our great skill
When eleven maneuvers are run-of-the-mill!

Chorus
“All-Girl Loads” is interesting for a number of reasons. First, the song seems to work at creating a discursive space for women in skydiving by asserting that women play an important and relevant role in the sport. In creating this discursive space, though, the song also makes a claim for physical space, touting all-girl loads (a plane filled with only women jumpers). In a sport in which women represent approximately 15% of participants, a call for a load of only women is significant in terms of the sharing of physical space. Men’s domination of skydiving goes beyond mere numbers, though. Men are, on the whole, taken more seriously as skydivers, and they dominate the sport in a cultural sense (Laurendeau and Wamsley, 1998). This celebration of all-girl loads, then, seems to be a form of resistance to male hegemony in the sport. In my time in the field, I came across a number of examples of this kind of resistance. Two of these are particularly striking. First, over the last several years, there have been a number of high-profile attempts at establishing a world record for the largest all-female freefall formation. Although there are various and sometimes conflicting opinions about these jumps, some of the women who took part in one or more attempt found it/them to be more enjoyable than skydiving in a mixed-gender environment. They speak in particular of feeling more support and encouragement from other female skydivers than they often get from men:

The whole atmosphere is so different than any regular experience that I’ve had at the drop zone. . . . In a mixed gender group, I would see a lot more of men criticizing somebody else’s, the way they’re jumping, or their skydives. Where women, if somebody did screw up, they’re a lot more supportive. . . . Part of the attraction, and part of the whole experience, is just women supporting each other in an environment where you don’t always get a lot of support. (Sophia)

The second example of this kind of resistance is an all-woman road trip organized every year by a number of women I spoke with. They describe the liberation of being able to jump together and learn without the constant scrutiny of male jumpers. In a gender regime where women are constantly subject to the heterosexual male gaze (Whitson, 1994, p. 356), some women bond together to meet emotional needs that might otherwise go unfulfilled in the sport. The song, by making a claim for a space for women separate from men, de-centers heterosexuality, moving a feminine-gendered agenda into focus.

Another interesting dimension of this song is found in the stanza about wearing tight jumpsuits. In the midst of a song challenging male hegemony in the sport, we find four lines that seem to draw on dominant discourses about the importance of appearance for women. This is particularly interesting because women have a reputation for falling slower in freefall than men, and one factor affecting fall rate is the fit and material of one’s jumpsuit. By wearing a “skinny suit,” a woman could increase her fall rate and be better able to keep up with a fast base (the center jumpers in a skydive, most often men, set the fall rate for the skydive). The song, however, does not frame jumpsuits as functional equipment, but as accessories that, if poorly chosen, would accent women’s cellulite. Women’s (presumably heterosexual) attractiveness is constructed as an important dimension of their participation in this social location. Though this stanza is a tongue-in-cheek treatment of women in the sport, its performance still becomes part of the structure of gender
relations in this setting, shaping the ways women understand themselves and their bodies.

Whereas “All-Girl Loads” spoke to women’s presence in skydiving quite apart from their relationship to men, “What’s Your Name Babe?” turns the tables on the common notion (particularly in sport) that women are sexual playthings available for men’s pleasure.

“What’s Your Name Babe?” (sung to the tune of “I Got You Babe”)

They say our love weren’t meant to last
But at this boogie we’ve had such a blast
Well I don’t know, if that’s true
But I don’t care, let’s just go and screw
Babe . . . what’s your name babe
Are ya game babe
What’s your name babe
I’ve got condoms, bring the gel
Too late to save our souls we’re goin to hell
We’re in the bar, your money’s spent
Let’s blow this joint and go back to my tent
Babe . . . what’s your name babe
Are ya game babe
What’s your name babe
I’ve got you . . . in my bed
And my legs . . . they are spread
And then you slide in
And then you thrust
I’m starting to squirm
And then I buuuuuuuust
So it’s been fun, but now I’m through
I’ve done all I am gonna do with you
So get your ass on outta here
And on your way, crack me open a beer
Out . . . of my tent babe
Or pay rent babe
Go get bent babe

“What’s Your Name Babe?” speaks directly to the issue of women exercising power through sexuality. The main theme of the song is the reversal of the dominant understanding of men as sexual aggressors and women as the toys to be played with. The female narrator is clearly running the show in the encounter, asking the unnamed male whether he’s game, trying to convince him that the two of them should get together. Further, she assertively sells the interlude, clearly playing the role of the pursuer rather than the pursued. She then provides a play by play of the encounter, all the way to her having an orgasm, thanks to the efforts of the man (“and then you slide in/and then you thrust”). It is interesting, though, that no mention is made of the man’s pleasure; he has served his purpose by satisfying the narrator. Once the narrator has her orgasm, the tone shifts dramatically. Whereas she was previously persuasive towards her mate, she now takes an entirely
Laurendeau
dissimive tone with him, telling him in no uncertain terms that she no longer
needs or wants him there. Moreover, the effect of the narrator continuing to call
him babe as she kicks him out has the effect of taking any tenderness out of her use
of the word babe while she courted him. It becomes clear that she used the term
not because she cared about him, but because it would help her get what she wanted.

Many examples from my field notes attest to the fact that a number of women
in skydiving are willing to take the initiative in sexual relations. On one occasion,
I was privy to a video from this boogie of several jumpers sitting around the fire at
the end of the day. One woman clearly had her own pleasure in mind when she
persuaded a man to shave her pubic area in a public setting in a performance to be
preserved on tape. The encounter was remarkably similar to a sexual interlude
because of the great and obvious pleasure she took in his catering to her. These two
left the fire together, presumably to spend the night in each other’s company. The
song “What’s Your Name Babe?” and the kind of scenario described here point to
women as active agents in this social arena, acknowledging their own desires and
exercising power through their sexuality rather than waiting for men to define the
action. They are also examples of women using their heterosexual attractiveness
and persuasiveness to exercise power over men. Furthermore, exercising this power
shores up the notions of heterosexuality to which the song speaks.

A scathing treatment of men’s attitudes in skydiving is found in the final
song I explore here, “The Chauvinist Pig Team.”

“The Chauvinist Pig Team”
The Chauvinist Pig Team we call them,
The Chauvinist Pig Team they are,
With swear words and bad breath,
Big egos, wet armpits,
And jumpsuits that smell like manure.
We watch as they Z out the airplane,
We watch as they take out the star,
And after they get down, they still try to tell us
What wonderful jumpers they are.
He’s constantly pulling his pants down,
The reason we don’t really know.
We pity the fool, trying to show off his tool
Cuz two inches just ain’t much to show!
They talk about how dumb the broads are,
And how all we can do is screw.
But what they don’t realize is men are no better,
For fucking will usually take two!
And now that we have your attention,
There’s something that we’d like to say.
You chauvinist pigs can complain all you want,
But in skydiving, we’re going to stay!

“The Chauvinist Pig Team” speaks to the egos of some men in the sport,
constructing them as big talkers about their flying skills. My field notes certainly
bear this point out. A few men literally talk up their flying skills to women, and
particularly to those women who are less experienced in the sport, presumably
because the men assume these women would not know better. More often, however, these displays of ego are slightly more subtle. In particular, a minority of men use their positions as coaches and instructors to show women how good they are. As Eric describes, “a girl comes on the drop zone, gets all this attention, it’s cool for a while, get all these thrill dives, ‘oh, yeah, we’ll take you out and show you this.’ . . . All these, what seems to be free coaching that is motivated by something other than progression. It’s not free.” The men Eric describes take advantage of their position to show women how good they are, hoping perhaps that this will translate into heterosexual attraction. In the song, though, women see through the façade because they have the expertise to know when a team has a horrible exit and weak discipline. The song goes beyond men’s skydiving skills, however, to lambaste their sexual escapades as well. It touches directly on the symbol of manhood, asserting that men’s antics make no sense because a two-inch penis “just ain’t much to show!” In a gender regime dominated by heteronormativity, such an insult discursively undermines men’s heterosexual status. In the song, women judge men’s performance as skydivers and their potential as heterosexual partners, undermining their power in both arenas.

The last two stanzas of the song seem to go beyond the gesturing described above, though, to make two important statements. First, the second to last stanza takes issue with the notion that promiscuous women are understood as sluts whereas men who “get action” are considered studs. The song points out that men “don’t realize [that they] are no better, For fucking will usually take two!” Rather than trying to explain away women’s sexuality or assert their skydiving skill, the song simply points out that men, too, can get caught up in their sexuality. In light of men’s songs that construct women as irrelevant or unskilled skydivers and frame them primarily as sexual creatures, this song seems to make an imperative point. If men equate women’s sexuality (real or imagined) with being poor or irrelevant skydivers, then it is rather hypocritical of them to tout their own skills as jumpers when they take part in sexual antics as well.

Moreover, the song frames women’s sexuality not as a character flaw, but as a choice exercised by women, as it is commonly understood for men. In asserting their heterosexual agency in the song, women challenge notions of female passivity, constructing a subjectivity for themselves. The last stanza, meanwhile, punctuates the song with perhaps the most important message of the whole songbook. Men can complain all they want, but “in skydiving, [women are] going to stay!” The song, to be performed in a playful public display, provides a relatively safe conceptual space for women to voice a serious concern. Through this song, women are able to assert that they have the resolve to stick with the sport that they love despite any obstacles.

Discussion and Conclusions

In skydiving or other social locations, song-singing rituals are interesting phenomena to explore in terms of understanding social dynamics. In this case, whether or not skydivers consciously construct these songs as forms of domination or resistance, those who write and perform the songs are certainly informed by their experiences in and perspectives on the social world of which they are a part. Furthermore, the performance of these songs becomes part of the gender regime within which men and women do gender and sexuality, so the meanings
embedded in the songs inform how women and men understand themselves, each other, and the relationships between them. Additionally, because they are playful performances, songs provide a measure of freedom to address issues that might otherwise meet considerable resistance.

As Kane (1995) notes, the transformative potential of sports in which women and men participate together is extremely high. In a sport organized around particular notions of heterosexual masculinity, it is no surprise to find that some cultural practices in the sport defend the boundaries of this dominant masculinity. The men’s songs considered in this article construct women as irrelevant or ineffective skydivers and underscore their collective identity as heterosexually attractive women at the expense of their identity as skydivers.

Women’s sexualization is seen in songs framing women as hypersexual beings and/or responsible for enduring men’s sex drives. Women’s sexuality is also constructed as troublesome in songs that reflect men’s ambivalence around strong women. The women in the songs are strong only in problematic ways (if at all), and are made to pay for this upheaval of the power structure through suffering physical pain and/or death. Further, women’s opposition to their treatment in the sport is addressed and then dismissed as weak and inauthentic. These songs also construct a particular version of heterosexuality in which men are not only attracted to women, but act on that attraction in aggressive and sometimes violent ways. These songs do not discount alternatives to this type of masculinity, but simply make them invisible. As such, they construct this selfish and hostile heterosexual masculinity as common sense.

In men’s songs, masculinity and heterosexuality are mutually constituting. Claims that women are inferior skydivers intersect with scenarios in which men ultimately wield sexual power over women to defend dominant versions of both masculinity and heterosexuality. Male jumpers routinely excuse misogynist songs and other subcultural texts (e.g., videos bordering on soft-core pornography) as just having a little harmless fun. As Schacht admonishes in his examination of rugby songs, though, this type of playful behavior is also serious business. Through these practices, women “are ultimately the real estate on which men construct, exercise, and prove the significance of their being” (Schacht, 1996, p. 551).

Women’s songs, meanwhile, take up a fundamentally different agenda. This is to be expected because women have historically struggled to participate on equal footing with men in the sport. The songs attack men’s egos in the context of the sport, as well as their behaviors towards women. They also highlight the double standards by which men’s and women’s sexual behaviors are judged and claim that women are just as capable as men of using members of “the opposite sex” for their own pleasure. Further, they lay claim to a space for women in the culture of skydiving and declare in no uncertain terms that women are here to stay.

One significant strategy of resistance employed in the songs is the assertion of heterosexual power. The songs mobilize a particular heterosexual femininity in an attempt to undermine male hegemony in the culture of skydiving. Interwoven with these forms of resistance, however, are themes that are problematic for women. In particular, references to the importance of women’s appearance have troubling implications, as does the logic that women can be just as self-serv[ing and shallow as men. These disconcerting elements, though, may be perceived as necessary ingredients in order to mitigate potential negative reactions to the resistance offered by the songs, making the display more self-effacing and thus acceptable. At any
rate, this content suggests that women’s resistance is constrained by the structural context in which it takes place. These songs contest the dominant order in skydiving, but challenges are presented within the parameters set out by men (those defining women as the other). Rather than contest men’s focus on women’s physical appearance and sexuality, women’s songs and their performance reinforce these as central to their positioning in the skydiving subculture. It would seem that Messner’s comments are as relevant now as they were over a decade ago: “the ideological hegemony of the dominant group shifts but is easily maintained” (Messner, 1988, p. 206).

This article contributes to the sociology of sport literature in a number of ways. First, in considering a sport that sociologists have rarely examined, it expands the terrain of what counts as sport. Second, it extends the work of Schacht (1996), Wheatley (1994), and others who have examined textual gender construction in the cultures of segregated sports. Literally and figuratively, women and men share territory in skydiving, making this a new and important gender regime for the analysis of configurations of gender and sexuality. Third, it explores a kind of text that has rarely been investigated. This sport exists beyond the realm of mainstream sports covered by the mass media, and most skydivers spend much of their leisure time engaging in jumping and related activities. As such, subcultural rituals, practices, and texts play central roles in creating meaning in this sporting context. Fourth, the article continues the project of acknowledging the intersecting constitution of genders and sexualities in contesting and defending the boundaries of hegemonic gender and sexuality configurations.

This article also raises some important questions calling for further investigation. Further research should address how women and men make meaning of the songs described in this article, as well as other gendered practices (e.g., rituals). A more comprehensive picture of women’s social location in a male-dominated social arena requires an acknowledgment that women and men actively construct their identities and practices in these settings, though there are certainly constraints on this process of construction and sanctions or rewards for particular choices. Further, it would be helpful to explore the ways in which these songs articulate with sexual behaviors in skydiving. The extent to which women and men engage in the kinds of heterosexuality constructed in the songs, and how jumpers understand these behaviors, would further expand our understanding of how women and men do gender and sexuality in this sporting context.

Projects addressing these questions can help to interrogate the discursive space existing between structural power and individual pleasure. This interrogation could result in a more nuanced understanding of configurations of gender practices and the potential for social change. It could illuminate, for instance, practices that problematize heterosexuality and heterosexual interest. Strategies that name and question the ubiquitous heterosexuality in skydiving culture might be able to shift the discourse and create a space for women to make stronger claims to subjectivity, not just as heterosexuals, but as women challenging men’s dominance in this sporting context.

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References


**Notes**

1 Most, but not all members of the U.S.P.A. are residents of the United States. Unfortunately, similarly comprehensive data are not available from the Canadian Sport Parachuting Association (C.S.P.A.), nor does the U.S.P.A. have data from earlier than 2001. The editor of *Canpara*, the regular C.S.P.A. publication, informs me that, as of February of 2004, there were 400 female and 1,872 male members of the of the C.S.P.A. (N. Ambrus, personal communication, June 10, 2004).

2 To make Jell-O shooters, one adds alcohol (usually vodka) to any Jell-O mix and pours the mixture it into small cups or an ice-cube tray to set. The result is a bite-sized, semi-solid alcoholic treat that may be “shot” like a drink, or wrapped in cellophane as a portable drink.

3 Whereas all of the songs in the men’s songbook indicate a well-known tune to which the song is to be sung, there are several songs in the women’s songbook with no such instructions.

4 It is telling that the reference category (as skydivers frame it) is men. Another of the women’s songs (“You Are My Base Dear”), interestingly, turns the tables: “I dreamt we had you in our grip/But when we jumped dear/It was a funnel/You’re so heavy you sink like a ship.”