

Episode 2.12 Getting Fucked Up on Learning (& Roller Derby) with Gillian Roberts

April 6, 2018

Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Happy April. We made it. My birthday tarot reading promised me that April would be full of multiple sources of joy and so far it's been pretty okay, so I'm counting that as a win. I ate pizza today. It was delicious. Life is beautiful, except when it's not. Let's go meet Gillian. Gillian Roberts is associate professor in North American Cultural Studies at the University of Nottingham in the UK. She has published on literary prizes and the Canada/US border in the context of hospitality and citizenship. Her current research focuses on postcolonial film adaptation. Gillian and I had a lovely Skype chat while I drank coffee and she drank wine. And what you're about to hear is just a portion of it. [Music: "Cheated Hearts" by The Yeah Yeah Yeahs] The fun and playful topic that I was anticipating, though I'm sure we could categorize with a little bit of linguistic contortions, we could probably categorize time zones as a form of play, but we're talking a bit more literally cuz we're going to talk about roller derby.

Gillian: Yay.

Hannah (Host): So will you start by just talking a little bit about how and why you got into derby?

Gillian: Yeah, sort of a little bit by accident. I really didn't know anything much about the sport, but a friend of mine had started to get involved and she just shared on Facebook the recruitment event for the league, which is now my league, and it was down the road from my house. And I just said— I was a figure skater when I was a kid for a few year— and I just kind of commented on a post "do you think there are some transferable skills between figure skating and roller skating?" and she said "yes, would you just come already?" And I went, "yeah, okay." So I had no idea how the sport was played, I just knew that there were roller skates involved. I watched the film *Whip It* that Drew Barrymore directed. I was thoroughly confused and a little terrified. And there's, although, although some of the stuff in *Whip It* is legitimately what happens in roller derby, a lot of it isn't. So I wouldn't take it as a primer.

Hannah (Host): [Laughs] My understanding is that *Whip It* is like fun, but not a good intro to the rules of roller derby.

Gillian: It's like, no, it turns out you can just elbow someone in the face as a tactical move. That's not a thing. So just be wary, tread carefully when it comes to *Whip It*. But yeah, that was my introduction, and because I could do some of the skating stuff reasonably well at an early stage just because of my previous

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winter sport background, I just kind of stuck with it. And it was especially then, but still to this day, a real antidote to my academic work life, and I've written a little bit about this on the Hook and Eye blog, but you know, as an academic because "Oh, we have such flexible working hours," which means we can work all the time.

Hannah (Host): I love it. It looks so appealing on paper, but the fact of the matter is just means that you're always either working or feeling really bad about yourself for not working.

Gillian: Exactly. Exactly. That's how it goes. I had had some health scares that were related to my workload. Some, I'd been really sick in different ways for the entire season leading up to the beginning of my roller derby debut, if you will. You know, like a cough that wouldn't go away for like six weeks. And then an emergency hospitalization in the middle of the night, the day before I submitted a book manuscript.

Hannah (Host): Sounds about right.

Gillian: For chest pains. Yeah. Because that's cool. And then worrying on the hospital bed that I might die before the book came out because that's the real thing I should have been worrying about at that stage.

Hannah (Host): [Laughs] I don't, I don't, I do not mean to laugh.

Gillian: It's ridiculous. It is.

Hannah (Host): It is. It's also like, it's not that. It's ridiculous. This laughter is like, laughter of deep recognition.

Gillian: Like because, and I used to, when I was a PhD student I'd have baby dreams all the time and you know, writing PhD and you get to the stage, especially if you are actually childless word, your books seem to be your children. And so it was like "who's gonna look after this baby if I die before the proofs come," you know?

Hannah (Host): Mhmm. Yup.

Gillian: Which is not what you should be prioritizing when you're on a hospital bed in the middle of the night.

Hannah (Host): No, not at all.

Gillian: Yeah, so that was kind of the backstory leading up to and you know, getting told off by my doctor for not looking after myself. And I thought, "I know I'll just let women hit me on a regular basis while we're all on skates that that'll be a really good way to look after myself."

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- Hannah (Host): It doesn't sound less stressful. I've got to say.
- Gillian: No, it's not less stressful. It's differently stressful. And I think, I think a person with an academic workload, or at least I find this to be the case for myself, it's like a change being as good as a rest and can come in pretty handy. But it was mostly about like, just switching off. I think because of the imminent danger you might be in on track, you can't be worrying about anything that happens in your work life for those two or three hours of a training session, because to do so would be incredibly foolish. So it, it takes over and really, in that sense, constructive way. It's like, no, honestly you are not allowed to think about that other stuff right now. So take a break from that and just try and stay on your feet. Good challenge. A good challenge.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah, I mean, finding something mentally and/or physically immersive enough to really distract your brain from such an all-consuming whatever you're all consuming stressful other thing is because the more I make this podcast the more I hear from people who aren't academics, who are like, "did you know that people outside of academia also have stressful lives?"
- Gillian: And that's fair.
- Hannah (Host): I mean in theory, yeah, in theory I knew that, but in practice just, I haven't talked to a lot of people. But like the need for like, deep immersion in deep distraction and figuring out what it is for you that can like, really jog your brain from one track into a different one. It sounds, from the way that you are describing it, like if you are not paying full attention, you might get hurt.
- Gillian: Yes. Yes, you might. You might indeed. Yeah.
- Hannah (Host): Okay. Alright, so can you— I am going to put a pin in the question of like, "what's the appeal of danger?"
- Gillian: Sure.
- Hannah (Host): Can we, can we take a step back and can you just explain for those who have only seen *Whip It* and that's their basis of what it looks like to play roller derby, like what you're doing at a training session, to start.
- Gillian: It depends on the session. Sometimes it'll be really individual skills based, like certain footworks or stops. Depends on the level of the session as well. For the kind of more advanced levels a practice we'll be working on like, well, like what is A team or what is B team working on right now strategically. And so we're kind of running those drills trying to figure, you know, trying to make sure everyone knows where they're supposed to be in those scenarios and working out ways of making it work, and trying to think how the opposition might counter it and what we might do to counter counter it, etc. etc. And then some of the sessions we're just having a scrimmage, so we're just playing the game

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against each other. So yeah, it kind of depends on which day of the week it is and who's involved. But there's a lot of, it's a kind of a combination of developing individual skills, as well as just the team skills that we need to work together.

Hannah (Host): Gotcha. What's an A team and a B team?

Gillian: A team and a B team. So our A team is like our travel team. There, they're our top skaters and then our B team is the kind of next level down from that. So skaters who are cleared to scrimmage at that level, and we have some crossover skaters as well. I'm one of the crossover skaters, so I go into the A squad, but I predominantly play with the B team. So we have a few kind of floating between the two. Yeah. And some, some like bigger leagues, like Rainy City who are based in Manchester, obviously rainy city, the rainiest city.

Hannah (Host): "Rainy city" describes every city in the UK. What are you talking about?

Gillian: Yeah, maybe. Maybe they should change their name to Rainiest City.

Hannah (Host): Okay, Rainiest City. Gotcha.

Gillian: They announced recently that they've started a D team. Right. So they got A, B, C, D. They're that, that, that massive and that deep. So yeah, that's kind of how it, how it works for us.

Hannah (Host): Do you float between A and B because the travel's hard?

Gillian: No, it's just really a question of, of level of skill. Yeah. So B is the kind of a, a good place we hope to— I'm the captain of the B team at the moment— so I hope to like, develop skaters and bring them up to the next level.

Hannah (Host): So that leads nicely into telling us a little bit about what an actual game looks like, which I think is maybe called up bout.

Gillian: Yeah, good knowledge. Good knowledge.

Hannah (Host): Did it, paying attention. Listen, I have a lot of friends who play roller derby, is the thing.

Gillian: It's great. Everybody should. Have you, have you been to a bout?

Hannah (Host): I have not been to a bout. No.

Gillian: Well, maybe you should put that on your list of things to accomplish.

Hannah (Host): I would like to see some roller derby. I roller skated for the first time in my life this summer. I was in Toronto and a friend lured us out to the suburbs to go to a

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roller rink and it was excruciating. I hate ice skating and roller skating was also very bad.

Gillian: Well, it's funny because I, I did ice skate as a kid and then, you know, I felt like it sort of eased the transition to roller skating. And then last year for the first time since I started rollerskating I went back onto ice skates and I was terrible. I felt at all times like I was about to fall over. It was the weirdest disorientation I'd ever experienced. Like, no, this is the thing I'm supposed to know how to do and now I can't do it. Then I think, "well that's the difference between that very thin blade of metal on the ice and then like the eight wheels."

Hannah (Host): Yeah, huge clunky wheels, like...

Gillian: Huge clunky wheels, yeah. Well, but either can be terrifying in their, in their own way. It's just whatever you're used to or not. So you asked me what a bout is. So a bout is two halves of 30 minutes, and the way the game is played— everyone always makes jokes about the ball. There is no ball.

Hannah (Host): Wait, wait, then what the hell are you doing?

Gillian: There is no ball. So some people describe roller derby as a rugby on skates, which is useful apart from the fact that I think then they think there's a ball involved, but there isn't. I've also heard it referred to as chess on skates, which is also, I think, a good analogy. So if you kind of imagine rugby as chess on skates then...Hannah, you're making a very pained expression. So maybe that wasn't very good.

Hannah (Host): Well here's the thing is, I don't know how to play chess or rugby, so with every analogy it gets less and less comprehensible to me.

Gillian: --like Grover. Yeah. So I guess I would say rugby because it's a contact sport, right? It's a, it's a full contact sport that's played on quad roller skates. And chess because there's actually a lot of strategy involved, although I'm sure there is in rugby too. But we played it once in gym in high school, so I don't know. So basically, if no one is in the penalty box, you've got five skaters from each team on at the same time. And every time play begins it's called a "jam" and jam can last up to two minutes, and then the play is dead and then you switch over. So it's kind of like a shift I suppose, in, in hockey, except that it's more fluid in hockey, right? You would just kind of jump over the boards like they do and start playing, whereas you kind of have to wait for the beginning of a jam in order to do that. So you've got five players and four of those players are blockers and one of those players is the jammer. And the jammer is the player who scores points for the team and they do that by passing members of the opposite team. So once they, we have what's called an initial pass, so they have to get out of the pack, they have to get out in front and, and, and then the next pass and subsequent passes if there are any, they score a point for every person that they pass. And that's how you get points in the sport.

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Hannah (Host): Okay.

Gillian: Yeah.

Hannah (Host): Oh. So it's also kind of like racing?

Gillian: Yes and no. I mean you are trying to get, if you're a jammer you want to get out before the other jammer does, because if you do you become the lead jammer and you then get to dictate how long the jam goes because you can call off the jam. So a kind of typical jam would be: lead jammer is called, that jammer comes round, scores four points if she passes like all four blockers for the opposite team, and then she calls it off before the other jammer can score any points for their team. So then it can be, if there's any racing involved it's usually between the two jammers. Like say if they get out very close to each other and you want to stay ahead and make the, score those points and then call it off.

Hannah (Host): Gotcha. So it's not so much the sort of race between the two jammers for the most part it's the jammers trying to get past people. Who are the other people? Who are the people who are stopping them? Are they call blockers?

Gillian: The blockers. Yeah.

Hannah (Host): Okay, cool.

Gillian: Yeah, you're doing so great.

Hannah (Host): I'm like really, I'm onboard with this. This sounds like there would be a lot of running into people and falling down.

Gillian: Yes. Correct.

Hannah (Host): Is that the rugby part?

Gillian: A lot of that happens. Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. And hitting people off the track.

Hannah (Host): Ow. That sounds ow. So where's the chess part?

Gillian: I guess the chess part has to do with particular plays, particular moves where you want to be on the track. There's things like, if you hit someone from the opposite team out, they can't come back on track in front of you. So a really common play, once you hit someone out, is to run back a little bit, and then they have to come back behind you. So that's really great if they're the jammer because then they have to try and get past you again. Or if they're an opposite blocker then they're separated from their teammates so they can't hold your jammer quite as well. If they step onto the track in front of you, that's a penalty. It's a cut track penalty. So you might draw a penalty that way. So that's just one example of one of the things that you might be having in mind in addition to,

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"oh and then someone needs to play offense for our jammer at the same time and we had to reform in this way at this bit of the track and..." So there's a lot of, a lot of thinking going on at the same time as the bashing about.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. And this is the kind of stuff that you were practicing running during drills and stuff. okay. So that is all super helpful and very clear. Either it's a straightforward gamer, you're excellent at explaining things and I suspect it's the latter. So I'm really curious about why roller derby in particular, and like as a subquestion of that, what is appealing about a contact sport for you? But like I'm sure there are other parts of derby that are part of the appeal.

Gillian: So why roller derby for me, do you mean?

Hannah (Host):: Yeah.

Gillian: Because I don't really, I don't really have a sporty background. Just like, like I said, I did some figure skating when I was a kid,

Hannah (Host): Barely a sport.

Gillian: Barely a sport. Sorry! I cycle to work, you know, and I would go for a swim occasionally. But like, and I was always terrible at team sports. I have no hand-eye coordination.

Hannah (Host): Oh God, same. Oh my God.

Gillian: Basketball, you know, you know, they what they make you do— I don't know what they do in this country with sports in schools. I think there's something called netball. I never got my head round it whatsoever.

Hannah (Host): Is it maybe, is netball possibly, secretly lacrosse?

Gillian: I don't think so, but maybe it is.

Hannah (Host): I'm just going to say that it is because I really enjoy, unlike most podcasters, I enjoy when listeners correct me. Netball, basically lacrosse. Come at me.

Gillian: I mean, you could be right though.

Hannah (Host): Stranger things have happened.

Gillian: So I was terrible at all of those things. So I think I was attracted to roller derby because it involves skating and I felt like okay, so this is like, the one thing that I can kind of do.

Hannah (Host): You had an in.

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- Gillian: But also the sort of origins of the sport are really interesting, I think. Because roller derby, I guess has been around for a long time in various incarnations, but the current incarnation of the current sport is really a 21st century phenomenon and it was a sport that was devised for women. Right? So I think that's just awesome. And men do play roller derby and there are some leagues that are coed as well. So there are contexts in which men and women play together. But it was really interesting because the world cup was held very recently in Manchester, the rainiest city.
- Hannah (Host): [Laughs]
- Gillian: And there was a controversy around the fact that— So the great thing was that the BBC was gonna stream three games on the final day. There was a junior game, there was the third place game, which ended up between Canada and England. Canada won.
- Hannah (Host): Ooh!
- Gillian: Yeah. And then US and Australia played the first place game. And the US won, which they have only ever done at the world cup.
- Hannah (Host): Oh, well damn.
- Gillian: There you go. Well damn. But so the BBC was going to stream those, those games on their website, which is great, like great exposure for the sport, but their publicity shot was of men playing to advertise this. And we were all like, what?
- Hannah (Host): I will be so confused if I saw a publicity shot of men playing roller derby.
- Gillian: Well exactly!
- Hannah (Host): Who said they could play?
- Gillian: Then it became kind of like, "it's because it's the roller derby world cup. Not the women's roller derby world cup." But like, in the world of roller derby, there's roller derby, and then there's men's roller derby. Like the unmarked position is actually the women's game. Do you see what I mean?
- Hannah (Host): I sure do. Yeah.
- Gillian: I think BBC Scotland got it right and had the women up.
- Hannah (Host): So it wasn't, it wasn't a deliberate decision to be like, people won't watch a sport that has to do with women. It was confusion on the part of the broadcasters that didn't see the word "women" in the title and assumed it was men?

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- Gillian: Well, this is my understanding, but listeners could correct us.
- Hannah (Host): Just correct, correct away.
- Gillian: But also if I'm not mistaken, I think one of my teammates, her image— who's a photographer also to amazing roller derby photographer— her image was used for BBC Scotland and they seem to get it right. But that's, you know, Scotland gets a lot of things right that the rest of the UK doesn't. So...
- Hannah (Host): I noticed.
- Gillian: Not surprised, not surprised. So yeah, I think the fact that it's a sport that's devised for women and maybe it's just because I happened to be a woman and I happened to have certain conventional features of a woman's body like hips for instance, that the way the sport and the I've been taught this sport and the way this sport works kind of works with that, you know. So whereas you can watch the men's game and it's very shouldery. Even like when I'm like dip, I can get my hip in. So it just sort of felt like, I don't consider myself to have a very athletic physique, but there's some things that sort of work with my body.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah.
- Gillian: Yeah. And it's a, it's an amazing sport to watch. Like, a friend of mine came to one of our games in Edinburgh, and he had never seen it before. And he was saying it's like this combination of brute force and grace at the same time. And I think that's what I really love about it, that you can, there's an incredible amount of finesse in the sport at the same time as these very awesome displays of strength. It's a great thing to see and I think it's a great thing to see, you know, a group of women doing.
- Hannah (Host): I mean like, at a conceptual level, roller derby thrills the hell out of me. Like a, a sport that centers women, that is about women's strength. Because the stereotype we hear about women's versions of sports is that they are always the low contact version, right?
- Gillian: Yes!
- Hannah (Host): Like, oh, women's hockey, no checking. Like women, like the sort of norm which is based on the assumption, it's based on all kinds of biological essentialist assumptions about women's like, inherent aversion to violence and delicacy, and I don't know, desire to nurture one another on the field. Occasionally pause and hold each other and weep. So like, a sport that has a space in which women can— I mean, I know you said this isn't a legitimate play, but elbow one another in the face.
- Gillian: Yeah. You'd be getting a penalty for that. Just to clear for...What you say about nurturing on the field, and although like, there's a lot to be said about, about

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team dynamics and supporting each other, etc., but it just reminds me of something that really drove me crazy at my institution where they were building a new sports center. So there was like, a temporary sports center that was erected while that was happening. They had these big photos and there was like, photos of men doing some athletic stuff and then there was a photo of women in a huddle with their arms around each other and I'm like, "okay, yeah, that happens and that happens for the dudes as well, but how come you're just showing the women doing anything other than standing there with their arms around each other?" Like--

Hannah (Host): That's all we do, athletic hugging.

Gillian: It's a new women's sport for the Olympics, athletic hugging. For sure. But we wanted to talk about contact, didn't we?

Hannah (Host): Oh yeah, yeah. No, I just like, so bringing it back to that, sort of, conversation about like, play as a way of escaping sort of toxic levels of stress and the fact that like, roller derby gets your mind out of those tracks because there's danger associated with it. Like again, sort of for you, I am, I am interested in, in what appeals about like, a contact sport. Like, to go from not doing sports to doing a full contact sport is, you know, quite the shift.

Gillian: It's insane, actually.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. [Laughs]

Gillian: It's pretty insane. I do have some teammates who have a background in rugby, right? So if you can see that trajectory. But I don't think I even knew what I was getting myself into, frankly. It's super weird. It's so weird to still, and this is like five and a half years on, it's really weird for me to go to the swimming pool covered in bruises and wondering what people think. And bruises or like the least of anyone's worries, right, with a contact sport like that.

Hannah (Host): Yeah, of course.

Gillian: I mean, I think also for me it came at a point where I was having a really weird relationship with my body. In my mid thirties at the time, and now I'm in my early forties. Part of it was to do with aging, part of it was to do with— I'm about to get really personal, frankly— to do with attempting to conceive and failing. And so the sense of like, okay, so my body can't do this thing that allegedly I'm just programmed to be able to do at a point when like, time is apparently running out for this, right? And then associated with that because it's about, you know, what time you are in your life, like okay, and now it's just going to get like, my body's just gonna get shit from here on in, right? Like that's kind of those, those are the messages that you get bombarded with.

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Hannah (Host): That's absolutely the messaging. Like, you are not young anymore and now it is a slow decline into--

Gillian: --decrepitude.

Hannah (Host): Yeah, yeah, exactly. And when you've been taught that your value is primarily like, reproductive/sexual aging is, is horrifying

Gillian: Yeah, yeah. And it's like from now on you are just relegated to the scrap heap

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Gillian: So I think what I really appreciated about the physicality of that sport was watching myself get better. Like watching myself being able to skate faster. So one of the things that happens as part of like, a minimum skills test where you have to tic them all off, is like how fast you can skate laps, 27 in 5. So for that particular minimum skill you have to skate 27 laps in 5 minutes.

Hannah (Host): [Laughs]

Gillian: I didn't get it the first time! You know, it took me awhile to get it

Hannah (Host): Oh yeah, no, I'm just remembering my one experience of roller-skating. I'm pretty sure I was skating 1 lap in 5 minutes.

Gillian: You have to start somewhere. And I would say loads of, you know, loads of the most senior members of my team— all of whom are younger than me by the way— you know, they say, "well when we started out we couldn't even stand up on skates." So it's definitely shouldn't be taken as a sign that people can get involved in the sport if, if they feel like Bambi the first time because they can still become the biggest badass on track if they're that way inclined to and determined to pursue etc. But I did, you know, I could see like, "oh my god, I'm getting older but I'm also getting faster," so that's not part of the narrative that, that we get right as we, as we age as women. I'm not the world's or even my team's biggest hitter at all, that is not where my strengths lie. But even watching myself develop that to the extent that I have, it's like, "oh, okay. So sometimes I can hit someone out and drag them back and do some other stuff too." And shout some instructions simultaneously. I also, it's total cliché, but like roller derby is so about multitasking, like insane amounts of multitasking that you feel like, of course the sport was devised for women, right? [Laughs]

Hannah (Host): Cuz we can do it!

Gillian: Yeah, yeah. Exactly, yeah. So yeah. I think, I think that's all of those things sort of came together to explain like why, why the sport for me at that time. And I'm surprised that I'm still in it. Sort of when I started I felt like "oh yeah, I'll do this till I'm 40," and then I turned 40 and I was like, "Well I'm not going anywhere."

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- Hannah (Host): Yeah, that's funny. Like, what about turning 40 in your mind was like and "once one is 40, one does not play a sport anymore. One sits quietly at home, petting a cat," which PS I'm seven years away from 40 and that's what I do.
- Gillian: Yeah. I dunno what. I guess I thought that by then maybe my body would have had enough and I might've had enough as well. But the sport keeps evolving. Different strategies evolve. So we're never doing the same thing every year. We have to adapt. So we used to use this one play all the time and then it's like, no, we don't do that anymore, now we do this other play instead. And we're always adapting and learning new things. And I think I've really been thinking about this a lot with your recent episodes and notions of failure and not wanting to do things that you're not good at. And I used to say that like, out loud to people, "I don't do things I'm not good at." And I was hearing this echo in, in some of this stuff that, that you've been talking about. And then I thought, "but, you know, that's a really ludicrous thing for an academic to say," and like I said it, right? it's like because, I love to learn stuff! It's my whole life. I like to learn stuff. I like to teach stuff. I like to learn from the people that I'm teaching. And I am, I really, I'm really plugged into that in the roller derby content. So I'm just like, "are we learning something new this week?" because that just gets me super fired up because I'm a geek. Right? Like, and it might be, you know, book related or it might be roller derby related. Either way, I want to know what the thing is. What, what's the new thing? What do now, what's next?
- Hannah (Host): Yeah.
- Gillian: So it gets me up fired up on that level too.
- Hannah (Host): Sorry. It gets you, what?
- Gillian: Fired up on that level.
- Hannah (Host): Oh, "fired up." I heard "fucked up." [Laughs] Just, "come on guys. Let's just get fucked up on learning."
- Gillian: [Laughs] It's a natural high, Hannah.
- Hannah (Host): Even though you didn't say it, it's what I'm calling the episode, "Getting Fucked Up on Learning." Okay. Well I'm going to grab, I need more coffee. I'll back in two seconds because I have more questions.
- Gillian: Fair enough. Go, go.
- Hannah (Host): Okay.
- Gillian: Back in the room.
- Hannah (Host): Back in the saddle. So just, like I got to wear these, but I hate....

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- Gillian: You do look like you're flying a plane, which is really bad ass.
- Hannah (Host): [Wind noises] Look at me go. I was about to say "I'm an astronaut."
- Gillian: I feel like I should know what headphones astronauts wear, but I don't watch enough sci fi.
- Hannah (Host): Also like, they're not the ones who are flying planes. So what am I talking about? Nobody knows. Okay. So on the topic of failure, I think I hear what you were saying about the irony of like, academics being so failure averse or like, high achieving people being so failure averse, because like it's almost kind of historical revisionism which is to say you had to be bad at this thing that you do before you started doing it. Like, getting to where you are involved a whole ton of being bad at this and learning. Like, everybody's bad at writing a dissertation until they've written a dissertation. Like, it's years and years of being bad, but then you retcon that story to like, "oh, I was always good at this." Like for, and for some reason we do all seem to collectively do that retconning.
- Gillian: Well, it's like classic autobiography theory, isn't it? Where it's like, "oh now I'm at this point of my life. Of course everything was leading up to here." Even my story about roller derby and now like, I don't know, maybe there was something else along the way that's totally different from the narratives that I've just given you, but this is the version that I remember.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah. This is the story I'm telling right now. But I think, related to this, like I think part of feeling comfortable doing things that you're maybe not good at is having a community that provides you a framework for that being okay--
- Gillian: Totally
- Hannah (Host): --rather than a community in which failure is a shamed and penalized.
- Gillian: Yes.
- Hannah (Host): And my understanding is that roller derby really provides such a community.
- Gillian: Yeah, and I don't, I don't mean to suggest roller derby is a complete utopia on which everything is always perfect and there are fairies singing.
- Hannah (Host): That would be suspicious, if you said that.
- Gillian: But I think, you know everyone's volunteer. No one gets paid to play this game. Everyone who coaches in our league is just giving up their time to do that. And no one's been trained really to coach, so everyone's kind of learning even as they're teaching, and maybe that helps. It, it's, there are some similarities with the classroom, and certainly when I take training sessions I find myself going into seminar mode. But for the most part we have to trust each other because

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we're figuring it out simultaneously. I think the notion of a safe space is really key and I think it's one interestingly because it's a sport, it's a sport that has often attracted people who don't have an athletic background.

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Gillian: I think partly because of its associations with a kind of subculture that make people who aren't traditionally sporty feel welcome, or they get attracted to you a certain aesthetics of the sport, I think this was especially true at the beginning. So we now talk about like, when skaters used to wear fishnets, right? Because that was part of--

Hannah (Host): Do they not anymore?

Gillian: Not unless we're doing a bit of a retro kind of game. I don't know. I can't speak for, for all leagues. I never have, and some of my teammates will talk about, "oh, remember the fishnets and the rashes we used to get," so I've never been tempted because of that. Or things like, you know, roller derby names.

Hannah (Host): Are derby names still a thing?

Gillian: Yes and no. I think increasingly, and I've seen this in my own team, people have been going legit, as they say, using their own names. But I still think, it's not always the case, but newer skaters think that's a thing that they really excited about choosing their derby name and, and so I think there's, there's just a mixture. And you see that at the, at the top levels as well. And some teams seemed to be predominantly people using their legal name. A team like Denver, for instance, it's mostly, I think it's mostly people just using their surnames, and other teams will be the opposite. So, so it hasn't disappeared by any, by any means, but I think, you know, some people feel like they're really committed to roller derby becoming more recognized as a sport and less niche, and they might be more likely to use their own name. But, but that's not necessarily always the case, so it's really down to personal preference I guess.

Hannah (Host): I see the division on that, like wanting a sport that is, that is women's centered and that involves a lot of skill and you know, is a sophisticated sport that maybe hasn't been recognized, like wanting it to gain that recognition but also feeling the loss of like that subculture is pretty great.

Gillian: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. I mean you see it in other ways like the, you know, there's a lot of tattoos in this sport, a lot of tattoos in this sport.

Hannah (Host): And how many tattoos do you have?

Gillian: I have zero tattoos.

Hannah (Host): So that's, you're saving it for your 50s?

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Gillian: Yeah, obviously. That's such a great idea! But I think that's a really visible, literally, really visible element of, of the subculture in the sport that is still very much a prominent thing.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. No, it's nice to hold onto that while I also get the like being part of the larger fight for women's sports to get recognized. It's one of those things that like, it's not particularly on my radar, not because I don't think it's important, but because I don't care about sports.

Gillian: Did you see that film, The Battle of the Sexes, the tennis film?

Hannah (Host): I didn't, no. Is it worth it?

Gillian: I didn't know this story, so I didn't know who was gonna win.

Hannah (Host): Which of the sex is is gonna win?

Gillian: I didn't know which of the sexes would win. [Laughs]

Hannah (Host): I just mean, in the battle of the sexes who's winning right now? Like, I think it was pretty clear but...

Gillian: Quite. But I have to say, just watching how the female tennis players were being treated in the era as, as represented in that film. I just thought, "thank god I play feminist sport." Like, honestly. Like, I mean, no one gets paid in, in our sport as I mentioned, but just like all the, all the crap of the crappy media and creepy male broadcasters. I, I can't imagine going through that context. It'd be enough to turn anyone off the sport. I think. So...

Hannah (Host): Your reference to like, you know, derby is a feminist sport and also it's all volunteer run and nobody gets paid, that. Those two things seem like not unrelated, and I'm curious if it's like a, it seems like a chicken and the egg thing. Like which came first, it being a feminist sport dominated by women, so there's no money in it, or there's no money in it and so men haven't tried to take it over. Because where there's money to be made, there's usually men. But the question is, is the money getting made because they were there at the beginning, or do they just flock to wherever there's money? Men. What are men up to?

Gillian: Capitalism.

Hannah (Host): [Laughs]

Gillian: Yeah, I think that BBC moment with the, you know, the photograph with the men was for many people a little bit chilling. Like, "okay, so this is the biggest mainstream exposure this sport has ever had in this country and that's how it's being represented." Right? Is this going to become a men's sport and women

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are going to be the footnote? And, and I have to say that personally, I feel like, oh no, this is a dangerous territory for sure. At the same time, and it's kind of related to the points that you were making about the tension between getting more exposure and wanting to hold onto the subculture elements, this sort of notion of the sport as being very much grassroots in terms of its organization. It's very empowering at the same time as oh wait, but there's no, there's no capital there. Right? And, and is it because there's no capital there that it is empowering? And I've referred to it in another blog piece as a kind of like, radical amateurism where there's such a sense of collective ownership. Again, ownership without capital, right?

Hannah (Host): Yeah.

Gillian: I think there's a lot of really interesting tensions there. And, and things like, you know, people talk about, well can we get the sport into the Olympics? And then, well we can't get the sport in the Olympics because the Olympics, you're, you're supposed to play under your, you know, medical establishment, gender from birth, and there are lots of trans skaters in this sport, and that's something that's really key to the sport. So we can't go down that route and wouldn't want to go down that route because that would be a real betrayal of what the community has become. So from that point of view, you think, okay, that external validation, that's not a form that is acceptable to us. So that's just kind of one example of that tension.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. Yeah. It's a pretty moving example, too of like, how radically different are grassroots feminist organizing around anything including sports is, from a sort of global capital framework for how identities are policed and how excellence is evaluated and, and all of these things.

Gillian: Yeah.

Hannah (Host): I just makes me think that this is a conversation Kaarina and I had on Twitter about success and the way that the Olympics frame models of success and failure. And everybody's obsession with those two Canadian ice dancers

Gillian: Yeah!

Hannah (Host): Their insistence that they must be secretly fucking because it's impossible to imagine them as just superbly talented athletes and performers.

Gillian: Yeah, because nobody's heard of acting ever.

Hannah (Host): Cuz there's no such thing as acting and there's no platonic forms of intimacy and men and women can't be like, close friends and partners. The idea of having radically different frameworks through which sport happens that are grassroots and feminist and inclusive and that have included trans women right at the beginning as part of the fabric of that organization rather than, you know,

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constantly needing to, to fight to gain access like, these are all things that it seems so much like in the move towards quote unquote legitimacy, they'd potentially get lost.

Gillian: Exactly. Exactly.

Hannah (Host): So, so to bring things back full circle, a thing that is really striking to me is hearing you describe what derby has meant for you in your life for your mental health, for your sense of community, is so much more resonant than I anticipated with my experience of barbershop, which I didn't think would be the case at all because they seem on the surface like very, very different things.

Gillian: I don't think so.

Hannah (Host): I sort of got more involved than I expected by not knowing what to expect and have found it to be like, it is high intensity and it is, it is competitive. And that means that it forces me out of academia at regular intervals by, by commanding the whole of my attention.

Gillian: And it's embodied, right? And when you were kind of in an excellent sort of pedagogical moment, kind of like, reframing what I had said earlier about what it meant for me to skate and how that sort of took me away from my, my daily work. I almost said like music does, right? Like playing music does. Because you know, if I play the piano I was like, I mean some people who are better at piano than I am I'm sure can like, multitask and play piano at the same time.

Hannah (Host): [Laughs]

Gillian: But I just feel like you just have to have such an intense focus on what you're doing if you're going to do it at all properly. Right?

Hannah (Host): Yeah, yeah.

Gillian: So I think, I think that analogy, it makes perfect sense to me.

Hannah (Host): And something about the fact that you're doing it in community.

Gillian: Yeah.

Hannah (Host): Like that too, I think is significant. I'm just thinking of a conversation I had with a friend fairly recently who was commenting to me that she has not had a hobby since starting grad school, which has been 20 years. And like, "I should get a hobby, what should that hobby be?" And it's like, "I don't know, bird watching?" But like for me, and it sounds like for you as well, my hobbies need to be intense because the intensity can pull me fully away from what is also a very intense career.

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- Gillian: The first hobby that, and this is the same friend— hi Abby!— who got me into roller derby, also got me into knitting. And I was just at her house looking at like a how-to-knit book. It was the *Stitch and Bitch* learn to knit book. And then she bought me a copy for my birthday and I thought, "well, it would just be rude not to learn now."
- Hannah (Host): [Laughs] That's how they get ya.
- Gillian: So I learned, you know, I'd done a bit like in school when I was eight and then forgotten always how to cast on and cast off. So I just kinda did it then. But that moment was so crucial because I was at a point in my career, I was in my second year in my current job and I still was having a lot of new teaching, or was still doing that thing of putting in an eight hour day at work and then going home and then working another eight hour day, and also not unrelatedly, getting tons of migraines. So it's the thing that I started doing in the evening when I got home so that I didn't work a whole other day. So I always joke that, you know, my two things are knitting and roller derby, but you can't do them simultaneously. Cuz--
- Hannah (Host): [Laughs] You can't, and yet I feel like the Venn Diagram of people who do both is probably pretty significant.
- Gillian: I think you're probably right. I think you're right. I'm just thinking like how could we make roller derby even more dangerous? Well let's introduce the needle into the equation.
- Hannah (Host): Somebody's going to lose an eye.
- Gillian: Exactly, exactly. I think that thing about hobbies though is just, it's really crucial. And you have to, you have to commit to them in order for them to save you from your job.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah. But it's a different kind of commitment. So like where my brain just went was like, "oh, this feels so much like that sort of neoliberal play hard in order to work hard, do yoga so that you were more productive at work." But like the difference here is like, a hobby that is based in like an anti-capitalist form of community that you have a commitment too that is outside of any capitalist notions of productivity, but that demands a lot out of you for other reasons in a way that reminds you that you are worth more than the labor that you produce.
- Gillian: Totally. And for me, knitting as another form of radical amateurism, as like barbershop for you, right? Like, it's just like, this isn't my day job. I don't get paid to do this, but this is like a really significant part of my life and who I am and I make stuff. You make amazing sounds.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah.

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Gillian: I make my body do crazy things that maybe it shouldn't. But I'm going to keep doing it and it's just going to be so much fun. And that's the other thing is, and this is all you know, wrapped up in your series at the moment is like, play and fun and imagine that you know, in the context of our capitalist productivity.

Hannah (Host): Play and fun as total time wasters.

Gillian: Yes. Yes. It's the kind of thing that we're supposed to go out of, right, as adults, but why would we want to live without it?

Hannah (Host): [Music: "Cheated Hearts" by The Yeah Yeah Yeahs] I'd like to end today's episode with a request, since it launched last summer *Secret Feminist Agenda* has been growing bit by bit, but over the last month it's sort of plateaued. I've got some ideas to get it growing again, but I need your help. Please tweet about the show using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda, rate and review it. Tell a friend. If you like it, help me keep making it better. As per usual, there are show notes up at secretfeministagenda.com. And you can always follow me on Twitter and Instagram @hkpmcgregor. The podcast's theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album *Chub Rub*. You can download the entire album on freemusicarchive.org, or follow them on Facebook. Gillian's theme song was "Cheated Hearts" by The Yeah Yeah Yeahs. *Secret Feminist Agenda* is recorded on the traditional and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh first nations, where I'm grateful to live and work. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]