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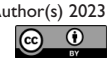

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Legitimacy and Respectability on the Skin: Bruises, Women's Rugby and Situational Meaning

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Abstract

Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork, this article explores amateur rugby women's reflexive negotiation of the bruises they earn as a result of the physicality of the game. On one hand, participants take pride in body marks that confirm their athletic strength and rugby identity and which grants them respect and belonging. On the other hand, these body marks can be anchors of stigma, signalling women's rugby bodies as 'deviant' to non-initiated audiences. The article unpacks this tension between bruises as empowering or disempowering artefacts by demonstrating the situational and interactional nature of gendered dispositions and expectations. I show that the moral and symbolic order of entrenched gendered expectations is perpetuated in the flesh, but that it must be understood as being produced and reproduced *in situ* through intercorporeal processes. Through the analysis of bruises, I argue that to study bodies is to study (social) space.

Keywords

femininity, identity, intercorporeality, reflexive body techniques, respectability, socialisation, women's rugby

Women's Rugby: (Social) Risks and Gendered Bodies

Bruises, scratches and scars are the common lot of a rugby player's body aesthetics. The contact on the pitch, with the ground, adversaries or the ball, all contribute to shaping the 'rugby body'. Physicality, pain and injury are prevalent elements of the rugby world

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(Doyle and George, 2004; Howe, 2001; Joncheray et al., 2014). The player's body is constantly put to the test, whether in game and training situations, or in rugby nights out, inevitably undergoing tears, injuries, and hits. Although the acquisition and maintenance of a high corporeal performance is an omnipresent consideration in the rugby world (supported and sometimes also required by various actors such as coaches or teammates), the 'rugbystic' body is inscribed in a 'culture' of negating pain and glorifying abnegation as a heroic act (Le Hénaff et al., 2008; Saouter, 2000). The good rugby player is one who goes into combat without any consideration for her own and her adversaries' physical integrity, out of primary concern for the protection of her teammates. When these bodies are women's bodies, however, the resulting body marks can be imbued with varied, sometimes contradicting meaning. As analysed by Gill (2007) in rugby, and Mierzwinski et al. (2014) in mixed martial arts (MMA), women's bruises outside of these milieux are interpreted as signs of being a victim of domestic violence.

Rugby has been portrayed as following a 'culture of risk', notably linked to issues with injury and encouraging behaviour that puts the body at risk (Nixon, 1993). However, while the physical risks of rugby are comparable for men and women, the social risks for women who partake in the sport are quite different than those faced by their male counterparts (Joncheray and Tlili, 2013). Long described as a 'male preserve'(Dunning and Sheard, 2005) and a space that socialises into and maintains hegemonic masculinity (Pringle, 2005), rugby is no easy space for women to occupy. Women's rugby identity puts them in a lose–lose equation of forfeiting at least a part of themselves and the legitimacy attached to their gendered or athletic identities. As Messner (1996) puts it, where the association of male-athlete-heterosexual is mutually reinforcing, the opposite is true for women, with questions raised about their status as women, as athletes and as heterosexuals. Participation in rugby is not only an act of cultural participation in a historically masculine, white, middle-class sport, but is also associated with the construction of embodied masculinity. Playing sports is key to a hegemonic masculine socialisation (Connell, 1987), whereas women's participation in sport, and especially masculine sports, is often understood as the result of a 'gender inverse' socialisation, a non-conform or 'failed' socialisation into their role as feminine (i.e. frail) women (Dowling, 2001).

Although records of women seeking to be involved in the sport date to the late 19th century (Furse, 2021), it is through universities that the game of union developed the most in the second half of the 20th century, and particularly took off in North America, where the men's game was itself less important and therefore where women faced less institutional resistance. In the United Kingdom, competitive teams appeared in universities, particularly those where rugby traditions were already strong (Collins, 2009). In 1983, 'ten students formed the women's rugby football union (WRFC)' (Collins, 2009: 378). Their existence in universities facilitated their case to later be affiliated with the Rugby Football Union (RFU; Collins, 2009). As Carol Isherwood, first Chairwoman of the WRFC testified, 'it was the universities that first gave rugby a foothold' (*The Rugby Journal*, 2018: issue 4: 103). 'The women's game grew rapidly in the universities, spurred on by the fact that it was one of the few sports in which women were encouraged to use physical strength and engage in contact with other players' (Collins, 2009: 95). Indeed, rugby is one of the few contact sports where the rules of the women's side of the game remain the same as the men's. Women's rugby as a sport is evolving fast every year, with unequally distributed but increasing professionalising opportunities for players. While this study is based on amateur players, it is important to note that the sports' landscape and cultural recognition is evolving slowly but dynamically.

Scholars who have previously looked at women's rugby, as for those studying 'non-traditional' spaces for women to be in, have mainly analysed it as a site of resistance to heteronormativity and patriarchy (Broad, 2001; Chase, 2006; Gill, 2007), or, on the contrary, observed female apologetic behaviour (Adjepong, 2017; Hardy, 2015). Hardy (2015) describes this as 'any behaviours that female athletes engage in to negate or negotiate the negative stereotypes associated with their involvement in sport by embodying the traditional, or hegemonic, heterosexual notion of femininity' (p. 156). This notion is also found in Connell's concept defined by its 'compliance with this subordination and [. . .] oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men' (Connell, 1987: 183). However, as Finley (2010: 361) argues, the concept of emphasised femininity 'leaves little conceptual room to analyze the hierarchies of femininities and the statuses of women who practice them'. Her analysis offers complexity in understanding that gender work of

femininity does not only operate in relation to masculinity but also in relation to other, unequally valued femininities, therefore accounting for hierarchical intragender relations. I find this approach valuable and fruitful.

Some studies have explored the empirical tensions that exist within these spaces, not analysing the practices or women who partake in them as *inherently* bound to either resist or conform, but how these coexist, proposing that we rethink what femininity is and what it does (Ezzell, 2009; MacKay and Dallaire, 2013). Lowe's (1999) work is particularly helpful in thinking about the fragility of gender boundaries, and highlights how gender categories are constantly (re)worked and negotiated by actors and institutions, grounded in contradictory situations, resistance and subtle change. Indeed, the article builds on these contributions by not seeking to define a particular position-taking from the actors in relation to patriarchal domination but, rather, argues for an understanding of identities as social and situational. Heteronormativity is not totalising or unique, it takes many forms and needs to be understood in the situation in which it occurs, to be *localised* in order to be (1) understood and (2) acted upon.

It is the de-essentialising work mentioned above that I build on. It is essential to acknowledge the complexity of the empirical situations we study, as well as their context of action. For example, Adjepong (2016), who has also explored women rugby players' relation to their bruises in the United States, found that the element of 'pride' that came with showing off bruises, and the resulting defiance of feminine norms, was better afforded to individuals who had existing white and middle-class privilege. While my findings differ from hers, the acknowledgement of the social differentiation *between* participants and their range of action offers an important contribution to the field.

In this article, I offer a decisively sociological analysis of bruises on women rugby players' bodies. Their transversality in different social and geographical space allows us to de-essentialise the cultural practice, individuals and identities at hand in order to look at situations that give them meaning. I build on the works mentioned above and on debates from sociology of class such as Tyler (2015), to understand the (mis)recognition of the body (and bruises) of my participants as a site of symbolic struggle. Based on an ethnographic study, I argue, that looks upon their bruises coming from outside the rugby

sphere can thus be *dis*empowering due to the imposition of discrepant narratives on these women's bodies. While correctly 'gendering' them, participants are associated with victimhood, which contradicts the empowering context in which bruises were acquired. Bruises inform us about the practice and everyday embodied identity of amateur rugby players, the worlds they have to navigate and tactics they must put in place in order to avoid challenges to their athletic identity, depending on their existing degree of freedom and privilege. I argue that bruises provoke bifurcations that players have to juggle, between traditional gendered representations and expectations of women's bodies and the demands on rugby bodies. It is this tension that this article analyses.

A Situational Analysis of Bruises

The article builds on the phenomenological tradition, particularly Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the situatedness of experience and transcending the mind/body dualism (Merleau-Ponty, 2013[1945]; Crossley, 2006). This ecological approach, though not flawless, constitutes a theoretical perspective as much as a methodological tool, and one deemed fruitful for feminist research in physical cultures (Allen-Collinson, 2011). My emphasis on situationality leads me to combine phenomenology with a pragmatist angle, particularly based on Mead, considering the 'self' as reflexive, and to 'be both subject and object' (Mead, 1967: 137). Pragmatism brings our attention to the practical and symbolic meaning-making that occurs in situations. These interactions can and do change our orientation to the world, the perception and presentation of ourselves and the meaning we attribute to particular practices or persons.

In this article, I argue for the value of the everyday and the mundane to understand how socio-historical processes are made and remade in interactions, in practice, without losing sight of the macro-sociological patterns at play or the dispositions of individuals, but rather enlightens them by locating them where they are produced and reproduced. I take the position that the moral and symbolic order of entrenched structural inequalities are perpetuated in the flesh and that this process must be understood as being produced and reproduced *in situ*. The study of embodied selves is therefore territorialised and *emplaced* (Pink, 2011), embedded in a physical and social space.

Moreover, part of this framework is the idea that actors are reflexive of their own positionally, aware of the categorisation thrust upon them. Individuals are not passive towards the social norms imposed on them but, as Mead argues, 'internalization does not guarantee compliance' (in Crossley, 2006: 94).

As I show, the symbolic investment and reinvestment of body marks reveal how distinctions between normal and deviant vary in different socio-spatial contexts. By doing so, I therefore contribute to debates surrounding embodied femininity and the social regulation of women's bodies by taking a decisively spatial and situational approach. I argue that understandings of gender dispositions and gendered norms are enacted within specific social and material spaces, and that similar individuals (re)act differently within those spaces. I deploy concepts of identity-making and the maintenance of cultural practices in the face of stigma or challenges, notably through tactics (de Certeau, 1980) and reflexive body techniques (RBTs; Crossley, 2006). RBTs are conceptually helpful in their acknowledgement of the body as both seen and experienced, as object and subject. Crossley (2005) defines them as 'those body techniques whose primary purpose is to work back upon the body, so as to modify, maintain or thematic it in some way' (p. 9) – they are an embodied competence and testify to the agent's active effort, contra Foucauldian analyses, from which agents, situations and social groups are relatively absent.

The characteristic of bruises, unlike pain or some injuries, is their visibility on the skin, forcing players to practically rearrange their self-presentation. Indeed, the skin is not an envelope of the self but, rather, 'something one shares with others' (Howes, 2018: 228). Not only is it relational, it is also 'intersensory', meaning both object and subject, felt and seen, hard and soft (Lafrance, 2018). The contribution of skin studies to our understanding of bodies and body work is important here, in considering the intersubjective, sensory and normative nature of attributing meaning to bodies (Skelly, 2018), but also the reflexive body work that individuals engage in when managing their social identities (Lafrance and Carey, 2018). Skin studies offer an opportunity to answer sociological questions surrounding norms, normativity and the maintenance of inequalities of class, gender or race as they are lived and experienced in embodied ways (Lafrance, 2018). This study contributes empirically and theoretically to this growing body of literature.

Embodied Research: In and on the Field. The empirical foundation of this article is a prolonged ethnographic study among two related amateur rugby teams in the North of England – a university team and a club team – between 2015 and 2017. During the 2 years of ethnography, I was an active player in both teams, therefore being exposed to all aspects of social life: training sessions, games, social events and daily life. I started off initially with one team and went on to participate in two after about 3 months on the field, since many of my participants were involved in both, spending usually between 25 and 40 hours a week socialising with them.

Fieldwork yielded many informal conversations, ethnographic material, and 33 interviews with players, as well as interviews with other actors in the rugby world, such as coaches and officials. Interview participants were selected according to existing rapport with them, and to obtain the greatest variety of positions and trajectories within the teams. Interviews were conducted at the end of each competition season. Some participants were interviewed twice, as I observed their progression into the world of rugby and in the team(s). Participants were between 18 and 35 years old, with a mean age of 20. Their social properties were varied but players were primarily middle-class, university-educated, white women. Their sexual orientation also depended and often was purposely not defined or fluctuated during my time on the field. While it is sociologically much more relevant to speak of sexual practices than sexual orientation (Mennesson and Clément, 2003), of the 60–70 players I was in continuous contact with, roughly two-thirds identified as heterosexual. The research was conducted following an inductive process, as I continuously tested and revised my analysis through ongoing exposure in the field. My participation in women's rugby in two different national contexts (France and Sweden) prior to this research also offered fruitful elements of comparison and reflection to understand my participants and the particular context in which we were situated.

Sociability on and off the pitch was equally important to understand the world under study and build rapport, as well as necessary to find a place – as a researcher, a player, and an individual. This granted me the ability to observe different social settings, spheres of interaction, and the diachronicity of experience, seeing actors evolve through time.

In this ethnography, the body of the researcher was a tool of knowledge, seeking to understand the phenomenological aspects of participating in the cultural practice that is women's rugby. This article addresses understandings of the moralised body through the analysis of experiences, direct observations, portrayals and stories of what Merleau-Ponty (1964) refers to as 'carnal intersubjectivity' (p. 173). I relate to Bolin and Granskog's (2003) approach, as they provide a helpful framework for studying physical activity, especially women's. Advocating for a 'reflexive ethnography', they emphasise the benefits of being a participant in that it does not privilege modes of knowing based on the visual and the verbal alone but encompasses other forms of experience. Its advantage in studying physical cultures is that it gives the ability 'to delineate the somatic experiences of women, the cultural constraints affecting their somatic experiences, and the corresponding impact . . . upon their perception of self' (Bolin and Granskog, 2003: 253). It is on these experiences, collected in interviews and through ethnographic observations, that this article is empirically founded.

Findings: Body Marks, Values and Identity

Body marks contribute to a particular aesthetic which constitutes a generalised 'everyday' rugby body. Because they are temporary, their presence is ever-renewed by play which creates mosaics of body marks on the players' bodies. This article relies on intersensory, corporeal and visual impressions. For that reason, before developing my analyses, it is important for the reader to understand the aesthetics that I refer to throughout the article. The examples of rugby bruises below show the difference from everyday mundane bruises – knocking one's knee on a table, for example. Rugby bruises are intermeshed with scars, scratches, stud marks and burns (Figures 1 and 2).

The Bruised Body as the Rugby Body: Belonging and Sporting Action

It's an autumn Monday evening training, it's dark and drizzling. Walking on the pitch I'm talking to Sam, her and I are quite good friends and often joke around, she has an excellent sense of humour. I'd announced to the team the start of my research a few weeks back. She strikes up a conversation about the PhD and who would be great to talk to in the team, and discredits herself as a worthy person to talk to, since she's not been playing for so long. I tell her I want to speak to everyone, even more so people like her, and that she would be

Figure 1. From the author's own pictures: we can distinguish scratches and burns at the bottom-right and stud marks near the knee cap.

Figure 2. A range of bruises and scratches on different parts of the leg.

great to talk to. I mention the main themes, then say I have an interest in the most mundane things such as bruises and how people interpret them, for example whether they conceal them or not. She grabs my forearm and exclaims with enthusiasm: 'what, are you kidding?! Oh

no! If I get a bruise I want everyone to see how badass I am!' [Field Notes, November 2015]

Within the rugby world, bruises can be a source of amusement, curiosity, enthusiasm and even pride. Bruises, scratches and other body marks can be acquired on the arms, feet, neck, face and torso, but most commonly on the legs. For Le Hénaff et al. (2008), they are a part of the *métis* of rugby, meaning that body marks are an unavoidable part of the practice, craft and skills of rugby. In rugby, bruises are associated with being combative, fierce, fearless, strong and immune to pain (Saouter, 2000). Most importantly, as shown in the studies mentioned above and apparent in the field, they represent abnegation: the body is no longer one's own but becomes a part of the greater social body of the team as one sacrifices for the game, for a collective purpose. Their mostly painful acquisition demonstrates solidarity for the collective, and acknowledgement that the latter is superior to one's physical integrity and individuality. These are qualities that are symbolically important to the group, to integrating it and demonstrating belonging. Bruises serve a purpose of acquiring, proving or performing group membership, and thus reinforce social cohesion by providing visual proof of a shared physicality and combat. They therefore play a part in the 'reputation games' within the group. Breeze (2013: 8), in her study of seriousness in roller derby, identifies that commitment 'must be performed and it must be evidenced'.

Bruises are therefore glorified and valued in the world of rugby because of their significance as a demonstration of 'rugby corporeality' (Le Hénaff et al., 2008: 569) and as markers of one's performance in a game: players often mention that bruises demonstrate that you gave it your all. They are earned the 'hard way', and they connect the player to their game. They are temporary reminders of the action and of one's accomplishment. The violence of the game is something to be surmounted, and bruises are proof that one has done just that. As Sam's comment evokes, showing it will positively impact one's reputation and is a source of pride.

In the rugby world, bruises are not only lived and read, they are extensively discussed. During training sessions, in the changing rooms or on nights out, participants show and discuss their bruises happily, some staying and affecting players for months. They are particularly discussed in homosocial spaces such as changing rooms,

where showing off one's bruises, or pointing to another player's who did not feel (or could not see) them, is an integral part of the intimate socialisation that occurs behind closed doors. This process serves the purpose of making bruises and the narratives that accompany them contribute to a collective narration of the team's games, players, and furthers the knowledge of one's and each others' bodies. Bruises can become active anchors of memory recounting and thus participate in binding an 'affective community', based on emotions that 'define the contours of the multiple worlds that are inhabited by different subjects' (Ahmed, 2004: 26). This collective memory work refers to that social process of homogenising collective experience and representations by narrative means that serve the social use of reducing the subjective diversity of memories (Halbwachs, 1980). As stories get told and retold, they become the collective reality of the group. Body marks can thus also bind the group together. Homosocial spaces are crucial to socialising individuals and reworking conventional gender norms of what bodies look like and can do and they afford a social space of reinterpretation and negotiation of different normative values, and one that comes to question existing dispositions and instil new ones. This work is done *in situ*, through the symbolic interactions of the group, whereby 'old girls' – initiated rugby players – transmit the values of the rugby world.

Body marks, even if temporary, are identity artefacts, confirming the identity of the player by showing visible signs of group identity and social membership. Donnelly and Young's (1988) analysis of sport subcultures shows that newcomers into established communities must both acquire the subculture's identity ('I am x') and gain the recognition of the established group (identity confirmation) to gain subcultural identity. This process relies entirely on building a reputation which will be recognised as conforming to and valued by the in-group. Donnelly and Young (1988: 76) acknowledge the frailty of reputation and the importance of it being maintained, or remade, in the case of someone arriving into a new team, who 'may need to have their identities (re) confirmed'. In rugby, bruises are a part of this acquisition and recognition of group identity. Bruises provide the opportunity for players to display two things: (1) their commitment to the team, but also (2) their rugby character, either by demonstrating the negation of pain ('I don't even know how I got this'), or the ability to withstand pain by recounting the scene and entertaining the one(s) who asked.

In a rugby context therefore, bruises can be worn with pride and can be lived as a sign of empowerment, reinforcing rugby women's bodies as *athletic* bodies. As in Kotarba and Held's (2006: 163) study of American football, this appreciation for receiving and giving hits and its manifestation on the body constitutes a move 'away from the constraints of traditionally experiencing their bodies as objects and moving towards the liberating experience as subjects'. Body marks prove that one was involved 'in the action',[1] corresponding to a sense of achievement, and thus produce a different kind of aesthetic from hegemonically 'feminine' (white, middle-class) bodies which call upon characteristics of weakness.

Black Eyes: Stigma and Respectability

The constant exposure to physical strain and the socialisation that results from playing means that my participants acquire a 'taste for the effects' (Becker, 1963) of the pain and resulting body marks of rugby, whereby they learn to recognise the effects of pain and strain and appreciate them. However, rugby women are not confined to their leisure sphere but interact within other social spheres. The normative values of the rugby world and the positive (re)interpretation work of body marks enter in confrontation with other gender norms such as that of middle-class, white femininity that my participants encountered:

Becca:	It's kind of like a badge of honour. Especially if you get a big one, you get to show it off at training. I'd say like . . . eyes, facial ones are annoying. I don't know when I'm a doctor if I'd feel any different [. . .]
Interviewer:	Don't want a black eye?
B:	No, I think they're annoying.
Int.:	Why?
B:	Cause people do look at you like . . . 'You're getting beaten up'

Becca's account exemplifies a common theme among my participants – that having a bruise has different connotations according to the audience one interacts with, according to *where* the bruise is located, and to the *social role* one is in. For Becca, a middle-class medical student,

bruises can be a badge of honour, but body marks to the face are to be avoided. Among participants, the meaning of bruises differed depending on whether they were confident that their immediate networks (whether work, family or friends) would attribute the correct meaning to it, which meant they could reap symbolic rewards from it and wear it as a badge of honour, or could enjoy 'looking tough'. Pride will thus come as a result of a certain social privilege in which the participants can reap the rewards of their rugby identity without compromising/spoiling their identities as women. On the contrary, those individuals in public-facing jobs, where they meet strangers every day, or have to look presentable, will tend to hide any bruise that could be visible.

In the case of public interactions, where the individual is not known and does not know the people she encounters, a gaze can be imposed on her that can cause discomfort or frustration[3] and is often discussed in the field as a nuisance at best, or angering at worst. However, just as not all participants are the same, not all bruises take on the same meaning. Of particular relevance in discussing bruises and how they are perceived is the black eye. The black eye, while providing considerable symbolic capital within the rugby world, is usually a dividing issue – while some participants are dying to have one, others attempt to avoid them at all costs. Take the example of Liz, a white working-class player who is highly respected and deeply involved in the club team. During an interview with her and her partner Anna, she explained her view of black eyes:

Liz:	Black eyes I hate with a passion.
Interviewer:	How come?
Anna:	Because people see a woman with a black eye and they automatically assume she's been beaten. And especially a woman like [Liz] because in people's head they have a perception of a woman rugby player don't they. And that she's quite big and . . . butch, which [she] is the opposite of. So they'll see her and automatically assume she's been beat at home.
Liz:	People always ask oh my god what's happened and I say oh I just play rugby and people almost breathe a sigh of relief and they're like okay, alright {tone of relief} [. . .] My worst bit is when people just look and don't say anything.

The players *know* what the narratives imposed on them are likely to be. As in Skeggs' (1997) study of working-class femininity, the participants understand how they are recognised, and especially *misrecognised*. The problem of public interactions, for instance on public transport, is that narratives that players know are discrepant are imposed on them, and nothing can be done about it. They felt intervening to explain and resignify would only make matters worse. As Liz mentions, 'when people just look and don't say anything', it is worse, in that the individual does not have a chance to rectify the misinterpretation of the black eye. In a Goffmanian sense, their identity is 'spoiled', being 'reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one . . . [Stigma] constitutes a special discrepancy between virtual and actual social identity' (Goffman, 1963: 2–3).

Patsy, a nurse and very experienced player, once sent me a picture of her new black eye to help my research and humorously added: 'I had placement and an old man sat me down to discuss my home life. He thought I had an abusive boyfriend and was offering to help me "set up" away from him'. The reflexive interpretation of the gaze as imposition of this particular meaning is thus not only a common myth that circulates within the rugby world, but an understanding of the codes of embodied gender norms and deviance to the norms rooted in daily experience. While often using humour as a mechanism to diffuse or dim the discomfort with others, these social hurdles can contribute to leaving the practice altogether.

In these interactions where my participants' bruises are interpreted to mean they could only be victims of domestic violence, these narratives are superimposed, particularly in public interactions where stigmatic gender expectations dispossess them of the right to their narrative and agentic bodies. Building on the feminist literature that addresses this issue women face in relation to the 'male gaze' (Bartky, 1990), we can talk here of a form of intersubjective gaze (Crossley, 1993), not one that necessarily creates self-surveilling subjectivities, but one that produces effects – either by instigating practical ways of avoiding to show visible marks that would spoil their identity, or by learning to resignify it and/or flaunt (as we will see below). The apprehended narrative of victimhood that gets imposed on the players will provoke various tactical responses.

Participants show here an awareness of their body as object to others. Arguably the lot of the female condition already, this is

exacerbated by the knowledge that their body does not 'conform' to certain expectations of femininity. The exhilarating feeling of pride in being an *agent* becomes an angering powerlessness over the moral misinterpretation of their bodies. This is not only a textual misreading of one's body, but also an encounter which produces effects and affective uneasiness of out-of-placeness. It is intimately linked to one's presence in a space where there is no shared understanding of the meaning of these marks. In this case, bruises are not symbolic objects to be proud of, but marks to be avoided and feel shame about – they are the anchor for stigma.

My findings suggest that the fear of 'losing face' tends to be more present among white, heterosexy fit women who identify as feminine. These findings differ from Adjepong (2016). Those that fear a threat to their femininity and do not wish to upset the gender order, or those whose respectability can be threatened, express caution, particularly in relation to black eyes. In my study, my non-white and working-class participants still took pride in showing their bruises, just as white middle-class participants went out of their way to hide them. Importantly, one of the most significant findings here is that we can understand these tactics not (only) as 'female apologetic' or means of emphasising femininity, but as a means of preserving respectability and moral integrity. Indeed, it is precisely the correct gender identification of my participants as women that instigates the meaningful association of their gender with victimhood, in light of their black eye. The negotiation of the meaning of bruises and body marks thus depends on participants' ability to maintain control over their identity and reputation. These social affordances are evidently linked with intersectional structural positions to do with class, citizenship, sexuality, race and able-bodiedness. However, the element of embodied respectability needed in order to have this confidence (Skeggs, 1997) was more complex and situational. Body marks are disqualifiers, but they can also be an asset, even essential to proving one's identity – to themselves and others.

Reflexively Negotiating the Rugby Self: 'Saving Face' and 'Showing Off'

Confrontations with peers as well as non-initiated audiences forced my participants to consider how their marks are interpreted by

different publics and what purpose their marks can serve as identity tokens. These rugby players therefore have an acute, reflexive understanding of their bodies within various social and material spaces. As Bottero (2020: 111) points out: 'people act on the basis of their knowledge of what will be accepted, and what they can get away with, and this partly depends on the nature of the groups within which practices occur'.

Because they are women and often in professions where there are elements of emotional labour and presentability,[4] my participants often expressed the need to manage the potential stigma of their bruises. Those who cannot control their audience reflexively attempt to manipulate what the audience can see as a means of self-presentation management (Le Hénaff et al., 2008). As Liz explains it:

> Liz: My legs don't bother me. I'd say 100% of the time I have bruises on my legs. It's been so long now, that I've always had bruises on my legs that . . . it's weird to not have them. No matter what, I always have them. So I don't really care. My arms I don't really care. It's just my face, I can't face the mirror, I can't face the world [. . .] I literally won't go out. I will cover it up, I'll put glitter all over it, I can't cope with it. Probably I make it look worse {laughs} but I've got a coping mechanism with it right: I don't really leave the house, I put my normal make up on and put like . . . lipstick on so I can be like I'm fiiiine.

Liz evokes her 'coping mechanism(s)', resorting to RBTs (Crossley, 2005, 2006, 2007) associated with femininity: putting make-up on, lipstick, using glitter. Confronted with the social imposition of meanings they do not necessarily have control over, the players had learnt to adapt their bodies to situations and come up with impression management tactics[5] of revealing and concealing – for example, by wearing tights, long sleeves, scarves or using make-up. This resonates with the experience of acne sufferers described by Lafrance and Carey (2018), who engage in concealment techniques and body work to monitor their bodies and manage others' perception. For my participants, the desired effect consistently links to maintaining a respectable identity or, rather, avoiding losing respect. 'Moral' identity can never be assuredly earned, but can always be taken away.

Experienced players help new recruits navigate these problems:

> Nottingham Tournament [24.10.15] This is the first time most 'new girls' ever play actual games with contact. One gets a nosebleed and gets fixed by more experienced girls on the side. In spite of being very nervous at first, lots of them being equally excited, they get into the game. Since it is a lot of us, our group is separated into two teams. It's a tournament so the games are short and the pitches smaller. In spite of it being 'friendly', the freshers understand that it is not an option to take it seriously and 'go full on', at the risk of injury. Both our teams have a break at the same time so we decide to get food out, have lunch, and we all talk about the games of the morning. The girls recount actions they did, which parts of their body hurts with a lot of enthusiasm and hype. The new girls are tired, look at their knees and, when mentioning a night out some of them want to attend that night, discuss how they will manage their outfit with their newly acquired bruises: 'I guess I'm just going to wear trousers now, so long to skirts!' [All laugh]. Liz is standing up next to us and listening in to the conversation, she intervenes: 'just wear tights! I do that, I've been wearing tights for 5 years now!' All nod in agreement and smile.

Participants who make this choice 'sacrifice' their identity as rugby players in order to minimise their challenge to the gender order, and particularly to their femininity or respectability as women.

This reflexive understanding is linked to the requirement to display their identity as rugby players. One of the challenges women's rugby players often face is disbelief: the disbelief that they are rugby players, the disbelief that women's rugby is a contact sport just as legitimate as men's rugby, and the disbelief that women's rugby can be violent. This leads to participants having to prove that rugby is 'tough'. My participants were often challenged on their participation in contact rugby. It is therefore not uncommon to have to 'prove' that one indeed plays rugby, especially since the imaginaries about women's rugby players – when they exist, appealing to a stereotype of 'overweight butch lesbian' (see Blinde and Taub, 1992) – differ so widely from the reality of the various physiques of rugby players:

> December 2015, after a home game, Morowa, one of my close teammates got her first body mark on her face (she got kneed in the cheekbone and some of her skin split, as well as bruised), we left the post-match food together and walk up to the bus, after talking about

> how it burns and me suggesting some tips to manage the pain, I ask her how she feels about her first rugby 'injury'. She replies that 'it feels great! Now I can finally show it. People never believe that I play rugby'.

The bruised body is therefore a legitimate body: one that can take and inflict violence, but also one that proves the legitimacy of the game itself.

This 'rugby coming out' will ensure that the audience is later informed about the individual's participation in the sport. When recognised as positive, it also grants symbolic capital to the bruised one. But identities are social processes and controlling one's identity also means controlling one's physical and social space. One way that my participants manage the integrity of their social self is through the progressive organisation of their network. Rugby reorganises the social landscapes of players, as they acquire a lot of new, often close friends through the team, but also embed their rugby identity in their existing networks.

These tactics of managing audiences and physical impressions testify to three important elements to how identity emerges in gender norms negotiation: that the dynamics under study of the loss and gain of respectfulness can only occur in interactional environments; that the participants are very aware of the stakes that concern them and how they are categorised; and that this reflexivity is the result of a learning process done through in-group socialisation.

Discussion and Conclusion: Identity, Privilege and Gender

Bruises are sensorial objects on the skin imbued with a variety of meanings in different contexts according to the situated position of their bearers. They are visible marks of physical engagement and the physicality of the game of rugby; they *impress* (Ahmed, 2004). As opposed to the understanding formulated in the subculture of rugby, where bruises are tokens of an empowering narrative, one where women have shown strength and power, bruises can also be an anchor point for strangers to seize this symbol and ascribe it a narrative of victimhood which actively *genders* the body. This gendering work does not mean to imply that the bodies were not sexed or gendered

already before. However, looks and gazes come to dispossess the individual of their right to a signification of their own making (although this is determined by the group). They are *spoken for* (Spivak, 1988). This situation of discomfort as a result of moralisation is not unlike that recounted by the women in Skeggs' (1997) study. Much like them, participants in my research demonstrate acute reflexivity and awareness of how they are being positioned. This study, through the example of bruises acquired in the context of rugby, contributes to understanding how women's bodies are valued, morally assessed and normatively gendered through processes of gazing and othering.

The analysis of women rugby players' bruises reveals an unwanted gendering of their body. In showing a black eye, female rugby players do gender wrong. One way of thinking about this is to draw on Bourdieu's (1977) analysis of embodied subjectivity in which the relationship to one's body is 'a particular way of feeling [*éprouver*] the position in social space through the experience of the distance between the real body and the legitimate body' (p. 51). When studying the body, we can therefore speak of a 'moral physiognomy' (Bourdieu, 1977), whereby the body is invested in several senses of the word (with meaning, but also with capital, to produce impressions), and 'the body functions as a language by which we are spoken of more than we speak it' (Bourdieu, 1977: 51). The same individual is read and feels differently in contexts that work differently. The marks on women's bodies which result from playing rugby speak to theoretical arguments for understanding the self not as fragmented but as plural and situational. It becomes situated and positioned in the social, moral space within particular settings. Body marks tell us about the materiality of bodies in space and time: to study embodied selves is to study (social) space.

The tension between the respected athletic corporeality and the respectable gendered corporeality highlights the ever-present challenge of the coexistence of these two identities for most women. This tension is less when the participant possesses a certain amount of social privilege that shelters her from social sanctions or that affords her control over her self-presentation. This greater situational freedom should be contextualised within the parameters of existing structural privilege. The historical development of women's rugby through

university spaces, as seen in the introduction, is no coincidence and contributes to a classed and racial selection in participants of the sport. Universities can offer an 'enriched environment' as Auster (2008) describes it, which shortens the distance of the cultural and social capital needed to access leisure practices such as masculine sports. Although my study overwhelmingly suggested the necessity of an existing 'recreational capital' (Auster, 2008), the affordances women have to act and present how they wish are not only due to their dispositions and social positions, but occur in the *encounter* of these positions and dispositions with the social world. Looking at individuals without the environment which they navigate is missing half the picture. Therefore, pride in bruises is not only linked to one's social characteristics as if they applied all the same in all situations, but rather is a contextual *negotiation*. According to the social and material spaces individuals find themselves in, their bodies will therefore be judged either transgressive or normal. The space of women's rugby offers an example of a milieu in which women's bodies and what constitutes valuable femininity can be collectively reworked and remade. But the complexities of the individuals, situations and of the bruises themselves, need to be accounted for, as it is in the empirical everyday of these players. I hope to have contributed to showing the methodological necessity for sociological research to follow the actors and embrace this complexity.

The study of body marks reveals the plurality of social spaces and value systems that women rugby players are a part of, and how they navigate these spaces with a mark on their body (albeit temporary) that externalises various aspects of their self and is interpreted in various ways. Public spaces remain, by and large, spaces where women's bodies are heavily scrutinised and moralised. Aesthetics are a means of social control which subjects the individual through forms of sanctioning and impositions, made worse by existing intersectional sources of oppression. Rugby women live the ambiguity of something acquired in action and strength, taken away from them through perceived misrecognition. Body marks, as 'fleshy' sociological objects, confirm that women are still caught in a losing game of dispossession, denied their athleticism and their womanhood and struggling to be recognised as multifaceted, reflexive agents.

Deploying a pragmatist approach, I have shown that my participants use tactics to impose the legitimacy of their bodies as 'respectable' *as well as* rugbystic and athletic, and of women's rugby as a sport *of* women that is equally physical and valuable as its male version. In this case, through their RBTs and presentation work, my participants engage in the legitimation of their identity and their practice as worthy and legitimate, whether that is their gender identity, sexuality or athletic identity. In so doing, they either subtly challenge the gendered moral order or tactically choose not to contest it as a means of avoiding the stigma attached to being a woman with bruises and threat to their femininity, heterosexuality or respectability. Doing a sociology that accounts for both the dispositional and the situational, we can account for the plurality and complexity of this micropolitical work on the normative symbolic order at work in social situations, for the interactional order offers a locus of indeterminacy and change.

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Notes

1. This can be a cause for in-group distinction, which is a subject I cannot discuss in the context of this article.
2. In Becker's (1963) study of marijuana smokers, this is a step of the smoker's career in which they have learnt not only to phenomenologically produce and *recognise* the effects of smoking but have also learnt to find them pleasurable.
3. Bartky (1990: 23) gives a clear definition of this experience: 'The gaze of the Other is internalised so that I myself become at once seer and seen'. Women's subjectivity is therefore constructed through being conscious of the consciousness of others of their bodies. Bartky calls this the 'double-gaze', as women not only internalise the Foucauldian 'total gaze', but also that which results from the condition of being objectified as a woman.
4. Since the participants are women, some of them have full-time or part-time jobs in the service industry where they are 'the front', and must provide emotional labour (Adkins, 1995; Hochschild, 2012). Most of these participants are medical professionals or teachers.

5. Referring to de Certeau (1980): 'I call *tactics* the calculated action which is determined by the absence of a proper place', an 'art of the weak' (p. 6). Their subversion is opposed to 'strategies', which presupposes power and an identified, circumscribed place, that can enact on exterior targets with relations of force.

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