

Danger and Dirt: Understanding gendered performance of risk in Montana

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The thrill of participating in extreme sports has led to people from diverse backgrounds joining niche communities of skiers, skateboarders, and kayakers. This evolution is evident in the increased participation of women athletes in extreme sports (Donnelly 2006). Despite this trend, masculine discourses of risk, thrill, and domination of the natural environment continue to be foregrounded in extreme sports communities at the expense of other forms of athleticism and more-than-human stewardship. By investigating the performance of risk taking among skateboarders, skiers, and kayakers in Montana—a landscape marked by colonial dispossession and narratives of frontier masculinity—I sought to understand how gender performativity is informed by ecologically imbedded practices and histories. Furthermore, my research contextualized the gendering of risk within the everyday life of athletes as they simultaneously navigate Montana’s natural terrain as well as persistent socio-economic disparities within extreme sports communities.

During the my research in the summer of 2021, I explored the gendered performance of risk among skateboarders, skiers and whitewater kayakers in three ‘more-than-human’ settings: a skatepark constructed out of concrete steel and wood, a snow capped mountain transformed into a ski-resort, and whitewater river stretches containing water released from a local dam. I interviewed cis-men, cis-women and a trans-man at the Bozeman, Livingston and Missoula skate parks focusing on how they began to skate and how the skateboarding community has impacted their everyday existence. In addition, I observed the unsaid or “affective” rules of skate parks and how these rules impacted how women behaved within this setting (Stewart 2007) . In addition, I was able to conduct interviews with different men and women who are big mountain (a style of skiing that involves going down steep terrain, cliffs and more natural barriers) and park skiers (a style of skiing where there are man-made obstacles such as rails and jumps which focuses on doing tricks such as a “50-50” or backflip off of the obstacles). I did some participant observation on women in skiing at Meadows Ski Resort at Mount Hood, Oregon. While this observation did not directly take place in Montana, many skiers present were people who live in Montana and were following the snow. Lastly, through participation in multiple whitewater kayak groups, kayaking with friends and attendance at whitewater festivals, I observed how women exist and perform in their gender on the Gallatin, Madison, Clark Fork, Lochsa and Payette Rivers. I was able to conduct interviews with women, which helped me understand different mental approaches to whitewater through collaboration and domination. In addition to taking copious notes on women interactions with ecology and other genders in the extreme sport setting, I was also reflective on my personal experience as a woman who skates, kayaks and skis and used my own experiences as a base for asking questions to my interviewees and understanding the women’s unique performance of gender in these settings.

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References: Donnelly, Michele. 2006. “Studying Extreme Sports: Beyond the Core Participants.” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 30 (2): 219–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723506287187>
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