Is that Really What You Are Writing About: Finding Legitimacy and Authenticity in Modern Skateboard Culture

by

Alexandra Ilyse Sarkowsky
Class of 2014

An essay submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Anthropology

Middletown, Connecticut

April, 2014
**Prologue**

I skate but I cannot Ollie  
I get from place to place on four wheels but am unable to jump a curb  
I am a skater  
I wear beanies and snapbacks  
I am a girl  
I fall on the ground, bloody my knees and bruise my arms  
I am a skater  
I refuse to go to skate parks  
I make friends with my neighbors because we skate the same streets  
I do not ride for air  
But I am a skater  
I do not wear Volcom or Quicksilver  
I wear what I want and do not care what people think  
I am a skater  
I watch the Bones Brigade like it’s a drug  
I know the great skaters but have never met a single one  
I am a skater  
I am not a burnout  
I discuss Durkheim, Foucault, Bataille and Taussig  
I read the New York Times  
I take school seriously  
I am a skater  
I see the world as a playground and not a bunch of buildings  
I want to use spaces for reasons other that what architects designed them for  
I see the beauty in concrete  
I am a skater

**Introduction**

Skateboarding is a physical activity with a variety of social implications associated to it. For some, being invested in the skateboarding world consists of watching the X-games and wearing certain brands of clothing, and for others it means practicing tricks for hours on end until you land it just right. Regardless of one’s stake (or personal investment) in the skateboarding world, it is important to acknowledge the various facets of popular, hegemonic (or dominant) society that have shaped and characterized skateboarding and its subcultural standing.
throughout the sport’s short history. There are physical, social, and emotional implications that create, destroy and maintain charged boundaries between the skateboarding world and that of greater society.

**The Bones Brigade**

As I will introduce in greater detail below, the Bones Brigade is considered to be one of the most famous and talented skateboarding teams ever created. The team consisted of skateboarders such as Tony Hawk, Lance Mountain, Rodney Mullen, Tommy Guerrero, Mike McGill, Steve Caballero and others who are pioneers in the evolution of skateboarding in the United States. Between these skaters alone, they have invented over forty original tricks considered the fundamentals of modern skateboarding (Peralta 2012). Recently, a documentary of The Bones Brigade was released, and because I had already decided on skateboarding as my senior essay topic, I chose to begin my research with the film.

While first watching “Bones Brigade: An Autobiography” strictly for research purposes, I came to realize more about myself than about how my project would take shape. I began to understand and articulate my own deep connection and love for skateboarding in a way that I had never been able to before. The film opens with a black screen; there is sound but no imagery. It is the comforting and recognizable sound of the wheels on the concrete. I can hear the transition of the skateboarder from the surface, into the air and back onto the ground. There is the echo of a skateboard riding deep in an empty pool and
the skidding of wheels on the concrete. As the sounds fade out, the screen shifts to a confession style setup with one skateboarder talking to the camera in what resembles a skate shop, filled with various retro skateboards behind him. The screen cuts to a different skateboarder after every one or two sentence response.

All these responses answer general questions about why they began skateboarding, why they formed The Bones Brigade, how they were affected by their experiences. The seemingly broad questions followed by short, snippet responses were overflowing with raw emotion. Personal reflections evoked a childlike wonder that somehow seemed ever so present in the faces of these, now middle-aged skateboarders. One skater at a time answered the same questions, each with intricate responses. Even more powerful than the words they used were their facial expressions and body language when searching for the right words. Each skater responded to each question with a verbal reply, a physical gesture and an emotional reaction.

Perhaps this opening scene was powerful to me because of my knowledge of the skaters’ personal histories. Or perhaps, I was emotionally connected to it because I skateboard as well. The individuals on the screen were skateboarders I had grown up watching in skateboard videos and reading about in magazines, but this was the first time I had heard them talk about how skating in general, on the team and otherwise had affected their lives. For the first time, I was able to connect with their struggles and successes, and follow their account of their lives from the teenage years to the present in a way that seemed directly relevant to my own experience. Suddenly this project had become meaningful in a way I had
not anticipated. I was not simply exploring skateboarding as a physical endeavor through an anthropological lens, but trying to understand how the development, maturation and culture of the practice has been influenced and impacted by the ways we—the skateboarders from The Bones Brigade and I—skated, by how we used and related to space and urban landscape, embodied skateboarding culture, and held on to and performed ideas about this culture’s authenticity.

For my research, I decided it would be most effective to focus on just one skateboarder, the creator of The Bones Brigade, and weave his life story through my analysis of the development of skateboarding as a sport. This would allow the reader to connect this development directly with a personal narrative and experience that both shaped and were shaped by this history. Skateboarders or not, readers can thus follow this history at two levels, a sociological one and a personal one, related to an individual’s journey. Due to skateboarding’s various intricacies and defining features, I begin with an in depth account of skateboarding history in the United States, starting in the early twentieth century up through the late 1990s and followed by Stacy Peralta’s brief, yet impressive, experience with the sport.

**History**

Unlike many activities and sports, the origins or skateboarding are fuzzy. As Borden puts it, “there’s no ‘official’ version of skateboarding, no one has any claims to ownership” (Borden 5). Therefore, there is no authorized historical account from where I can draw. While on the one hand this poses frustrations for those seeking the historical roots of skateboarding, the lack of ownership is
characteristic of how skateboarders have come to view the culture that emerged around the practice. There are some facts that are better known than others, but what this historical introduction to skateboarding is intended to do is provide some context and background for where my story truly begins.

Skateboarding seems to have its origins in the apple crate scooter, which as Borden describes was made “from a 2x4 inch plank of wood, an apple crate and a single roller skate” (Borden 13); the item was made and used by children in the early 1900s. However, over time, children realized that the crate itself was an unnecessary element of the board, and thus the skateboard was created. In the 1960s, skateboarding, or “sidewalk surfing,” (Peralta 2005) as it was known in the beach communities of California later in the century, became an after surfing activity. Skateboard style was based on that of surfing, where concrete hills rather than the waves in the water were ridden. But skateboarding was seen as a leisure activity for after surfing, not as a separate activity, distinct from surfing. The skateboards of the time were short and made out of plastic with clay wheels. As Dennis Shufedt states, “We were just using 2 by 4’s and steel skates, our sister’s skates pulled apart and nailed onto a 2 by 4. It was just riding and having fun” (Borden 14). The skate style at the time was very upright and tricks were nothing more than certain spins, turns and slalom moves. Much like in skiing, slalom style skateboarding placed skateboarders at the top of an incline, with plastic cones or markers set up for an individual to weave in and out of. Therefore, the most successful slalom rider would be the one who completed the course fastest and flawlessly. However, it was not until a few years later in the
1960s that skateboarding experienced its first resurgence into popular culture.

The 1960’s also brought the first printed skateboard magazine, the first international skateboarding competition on national television, and mass-produced skateboards (Borden 2001). For example, “Vita-Pact (a well known juice company in Covina California) introduced the ‘hobie’ skateboard in [early] 1965 with clay wheels and a fiberglass deck, and went to make over six million skateboards that year” (Borden 16-17). Skateboarding turned into a craze throughout the country among youth. However, skating was considered neither a sport nor leisure activity. In fact, it was considered another kiddie fad like the yo-yo or the hula-hoop (Peralta 2005). The technology behind skateboarding in the 1960's did not help increase its popularity either. Clay was the same material used to make roller skate wheels, creating a very sensitive and dangerous ride for skaters. Unless skaters were on flat and smooth terrain, obstacles as small as a pebble could lock out the wheel, sending riders skidding or flying off the board. Despite donning helmets and pads, skateboarding was highly unpopular among parents (for safety reasons in particular), and many banned their children from skateboarding at all.

The belief that skaters continually faced danger caused skateboarding to take a dive in its relative popularity and in media coverage. Skateboarding competitions (the few that had begun to pop up) struggled to register enough participants, and SkateBoarder Magazine, first published by Surfer Publications in 1964, ceased production by the end of 1965. Despite the fall in skateboarding’s popularity and practical demise in circulated media, the sport
did not die out completely. In coastal areas, and especially in Southern California, skateboarding was still practiced and the perseverance of the post-surfing activity alongside the development of safer skateboard technology would eventually give way to a second resurgence in the mid-1970s.

In an area of Los Angeles known as “Dogtown” (South Santa Monica, Venice, and Ocean Park), surfers continued skateboarding after their surf sessions in the morning or when waves were bad even through skateboarding’s lowest popularity moments (Peralta 2005). The local, and arguably the most talented, surf team in Dogtown at the time was the Zephyr Surf Team, or the Z-boys, as they were most commonly known, who were sponsored by Skip Engblom and Jeff Ho. Engblom and Ho, talented surfers in their own right, were the owners of Jeff Ho Surfboards and Zephyr Productions, considered the more rough-around-the-edges but also specialized local surf shop where the Dogtown youth tended to hang out after a morning of surfing (Peralta 2005). The team practiced their moves in the water daily and spent their afternoons by the Zephyr shop, skateboarding and practicing their skate maneuvers on the sidewalk and on the concrete laden elementary schools of the Dogtown area.

The Z-boys had a very distinct style of skating. They had a low slung skate style based on surf technique, and many members of the team practiced a move they dubbed the “Bert,” modeled after their most influential and favorite surfer at the time, Larry Bertleman (Peralta 2005). The move allowed the skaters to get low to the ground and slalom back and forth, riding concrete banks like they would ride waves. As Borden explains, it was “through surf-related moves [that]
skaters recombined body, board and terrain, simultaneously copying one activity (surfing) while initiating a second (skateboarding)” (Borden 33).

Because of skateboarding’s sharp decline in 1965, skateboard companies stopped mass-producing boards due to diminishing profits. Despite the lack of boards, the Z-boys got creative with their equipment. They would “go to the thrift shop and buy a pair of roller skates with clay wheels and cut it in half and go into your garage and cut out the drawer from a dresser” (Peralta 2005). This homemade skateboard was much like a deconstructed apple crate scooter of the 1950s; no crate or handlebars, just a wooden plank and four wheels. While these boards kept the sport alive, skateboarding was stuck in a somewhat primitive state because of this technology. The clay wheels from the roller skates continued to catch on every crack, pebble, and dip in the concrete, leaving skaters with broken equipment almost daily. Tony Alva, one of the Z-boys (and eventually a world famous skateboarder and entrepreneur), says that he would, “break a wheel everyday, chip the cones out, lose some bearings (a piece of metal hardware that allows the wheels to spin continuously), knock the screws out of your wood. I’d make a board everyday” (Alva 1988). It was not until 1972, that the modern skateboard began to take shape. What began with a simple change in materials became the total reinvention of the wheel.

Frank Nasworthy, a skateboarder hailing from Virginia, created the Cadillac Wheels Company in 1972, and he is considered to be the first person to use polyurethane (a synthetic, petroleum-based material) for skateboard wheels
Nasworthy was acutely aware of how quickly the classic clay wheels on skateboards wore out and how unreliable they were when skating over the natural cracks and divots of the concrete. The soft polyurethane material would be able to grip the ground more effectively and allow riders to have more control when skating around. In fact, urethane wheels remain a popular wheel type due to Nasworthy’s innovative discovery. Now, skaters could ride the same set of wheels for days and weeks at a time without the worry that they might wear out or lock up on a loose pebble. With the creation of a smoother riding surface, skateboarders could ride over more types of surfaces with better grip on a board that they could now manipulate in ways that had never been possible before.

**The Second Wave**

The early 1970s can thus be classified as the second wave of skateboard enthusiasm, which led to new skateboard competitions and most importantly the induction of a new style of skating all together. While initially, sidewalks and concrete banks were thought to be the main skating surfaces, new wheels and an extremely hot summer in 1976 led to a shift in skateboarding positions, from an exclusively upright one to more vertical ones.

That year, there was a drought season in Southern California. While this was economically difficult for homeowners, it was fortuitous for skateboarders. The long-term, drought-induced “water hold” policies throughout California and Los Angeles County in particular, caused residential pools to be unattended and left to dry up while others were emptied (Peralta 2005). Although the City of Los Angeles is a short distance from the beach, residential pools were (and still are)
a popular backyard feature of homes, especially in the San Fernando Valley\(^1\) and other, wealthier parts of town.\(^2\) While the density of pools per square mile may have been high, the accessibility of these skate oases was another story. These neglected pools provided what skaters saw as a new type of terrain on which to skate, but with an added element of challenge and danger as well. Because these pools were inside privately owned property, the only access the Z-boys had to them was by breaking in. However, with the increased grip of the new polyurethane wheels, and with the lure of the new skate spaces, the Z-boys took advantage of the opportunity, no matter the cost.

The pools brought about a third dimension to skateboarding that had never been experienced before and was the start of what is called vertical\(^3\) skating. The pool as a skate locale was where the first aerial tricks\(^4\) were created and where Z-boy and future skate-legend Tony Alva made the first of many lasting marks on the sport. Pools became the new cool place to ride although freestyle skating\(^5\) was still known in the community due to its reinvigorated popularity and the new organized competitions.

As skating moved into the early 1980’s skate parks started to pop up as permitted areas for skateboarders, containing obstacles and other manmade, skate-friendly surfaces. Unlike the pools, these places were especially designed

---

\(^1\) A place that I will refer to later as simply “the valley.”
\(^2\) I am from Encino (a part of the San Fernando Valley), which is only a 15-20 minute drive from the beach. Yet, my home, when I was growing up, as well as that of many of my friends’ homes, all had pools in their backyards. Therefore, it is important to note that there is a high density of residential pools in the area.
\(^3\) A more common name being “vert.”
\(^4\) These tricks involved having at least one wheel of the skateboard off the skate surface.
\(^5\) The more upright, 1960s style of skating.
for skateboarders to have their own terrain, but due to design flaws and another sharp decline in the sport’s popularity, the parks didn’t quite succeed in attracting users. A revived *SkateBoader Magazine* had gone out of business yet again, and skate parks were shutting down. Skateboarders were still out there, but their new designated spaces and organized competitions seemingly disappeared overnight. The loss of ideal vert skating elements—which they had in the surfaces of empty pools—hastened the decline. However, instead of letting the activity fizzle out once and for all, the most passionate and dedicated members of what could now be considered the skateboarding community, like those before them, found a new way and a new place to continue advancing the practice of skateboarding: backyard ramps. The only missing item skateboarders needed was somewhere to skate, and there was no legally permitted space the greater society (local pool owners, government, and neighbors) deemed appropriate. Thus, skateboarders (yet again) used their creativity to further expand the range of skate-able spaces and places.

**The Modern Era**

Skaters built wooden ramps and half pipes\(^6\) in their backyards to provide themselves with a space that, like the pools, had structurally ideal angles and edges to create, land, and perform aerial tricks. The closures of skate parks and the limited ramp access (due to ramps being built in individuals’ backyards) impacted skaters’ ability to skateboard with and compete against anyone outside

---

\(^6\) Exactly how it sounds: A half pipe is a manmade element that resembles a round pipe although instead of building the complete 360-degree circumference, the half pipe only measures to 180 degrees of a given circumference.
of a skater’s local vicinity or neighborhood. Thus, what the skaters decided to do was to organize their own competitions, on their own terms and in their own backyards. Soon, competitions would be thrown together by groups of skaters and take place at various backyard ramps across the country. Winners never received much in the way of prize money, but the goal of these contests was not for skaters to make a living. Most critically, these competitions provided a social space where skaters could build and maintain personal ties with individuals within the skateboarding community. These organized events brought back hype to skateboarding and provided skaters with an opportunity to further its development despite the lack of physical locations to claim as their own.

Thus far, the development of skateboard tricks was based on the limits and possibilities of the physical location. By skating on the sidewalk, for example, the low-slung surf style was created. Skating in pools led to the realization that vertical tricks were possible, and ramp development provided skateboarders with the opportunity to land aerials higher than ever before. However, it was with the development of a particular trick that skaters discovered the newest skate-able location. The development of the ‘Ollie,’ proved to skaters that their activity was not limited to parks or ramps but that, in fact, they could skate in the existing urban environment. The Ollie is a skateboard trick where the rider and the board leap into the air without any use of the rider’s hands. The trick tends to be done on flat ground and allows skaters to jump over, onto, off of, or into any obstacle.

---

7 A location I will refer to as “the street.”
The street was an appealing location that skaters had never fully taken advantage of before. Previously, new tricks had been invented as skaters reacted to a new type of terrain. However, the creation of the Ollie proved to skaters that tricks were not dependent on the places they skated; the only limiting factor to trick creation and completion was the skater him/herself. On the one hand, the skate parks’ closure did influence the return to the streets and the realization of the street’s possibilities. Now, skaters who lived in an area that perhaps did not have a skate park or a backyard ramp realized that they did not need one. All they needed was their board; the different tricks could travel with them. As Stacy Peralta states, “The emergence of the new street style is the biggest thing to hit skateboarding since pool riding in the 70’s. It’s a whole new form, different, yet a combination of all other aspects of skating” (Borden 182). The Ollie became a foundational trick, the mastery of which allowed skateboarders to create and further their repertoire.

The Ollie was a trick that could be molded to and modified for any urban terrain. Skaters could Ollie onto different surfaces allowing them to grind, jump and spin over almost any topography imaginable. The world of skateboarding was now open to every skater no matter where they might be located. Previously, skaters without access to skate parks, as was the case for many around the country, would only be able to actively engage with the skate community through magazines, videos and other skateboard media, but now, as a Santa Cruz Skateboard Company ad proclaimed, “Everybody, Everywhere!”

---

8 A grind is a type of skateboarding trick where a skateboarder slides along a surface using the metal trucks of the board as opposed to the wheels.
(Borden 183) had the ability to take part in skateboarding no matter where they may be.

**Stacy Peralta**

Stacy Peralta was born in Venice California in 1957. Little did he know that he would go on to be a world champion skateboarder, a skateboarding team coach, and a movie director and producer. He is arguably the first skateboarder to successfully maintain his aura of “authenticity” and style while finding a way to make money at doing what he loved the most, skateboarding. His first exposure to skating came as a kid on the streets of Venice beach. In 1974, Peralta made the Zephyr Surf Team. To him, making the team was seen as the coolest thing to do. Stacy’s competition career began in 1975 at the Del Mar Nationals, the first organized competition set up by Bahne skateboards in an effort to get skateboarding back on the radar of youth interests. Stacy and the rest of the team placed and were able to show other skaters what the future of skateboarding would look like. Unfortunately, the Z-boys’ success was somewhat short lived. The Zephyr Shop closed in 1976. Many of the Z-boys, Peralta included, had joined the professional skateboard circuit, being sponsored by big name companies, and tensions brought about by suddenly having access to money tore the team apart. Despite the team’s sort lived history, their impact on the skateboarding world and on Stacy’s life, in particular, were everlasting.

In 1978, Peralta, already a world-renowned champion, joined with product designer George Powell, a Stanford-educated engineer, to create Powell-Peralta skateboards (Peralta 2012). Stacy was passionate about the company but
his biggest undertaking was the creation of The Bones Brigade, the Powell-Peralta skate team that they formed in 1979. After having lived through the tumult, excitement and eventual demise of the Z-boys crew, Peralta wanted a team that would not collapse under the pressure but thrive with sponsorships and withstand the hype inherent to the sport. Other teams such as Tony Alva’s “posse” took experienced riders from the 1970s and tried to stick them together and form new teams, but Stacy wanted nothing to do with well-known riders. He traveled the country going to amateur competitions and decided that his team was going to be young, malleable, and unknown to the pro world. The Bones Brigade included Tony Hawk, Lance Mountain, Steve Caballero, Mike McGill, and other skaters who would go on to be some of the most influential of the century. Although only 22 years old at the time, Stacy was The Bones Brigade manager, coach, and advisor to this team made up of misfits. The team would win competitions in vertical (vert), freestyle, and street skating as each of these styles of skating began to be recognized on a national and competitive level. The team quickly rose to fame, with members like Rodney Mullen and Tony Hawk winning first prize in nearly every competition they entered.
Space

Urban Space

There is no way to fully unpack the impact on dominant society of a subcultural activity like skateboarding without looking at its effect on physical and social spaces. Skateboarding is an activity shaped by and shaping of space and the presence, creation, and restrictions of urban spaces have fundamentally defined skate culture. For this part my work I rely on the theories of scholars and writers Tim Cresswell, Iain Borden, and David Sibley.

Cresswell, a human and cultural geographer is the author of Place: A Short Introduction as well as of In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression. Historically, he argues, “space” has been defined in abstract terms while “place” has been associated with more concrete meanings. In Place, Cresswell explains both of these terms at length, claiming that, “the word place refers to something more than a spatial referent” whereas, “implied in [the term space] is a sense of the proper” (Cresswell 3). While Cresswell goes into detail about the distinctions between space and place, I plan to focus on how any place serves as geographical location but embodies a set of social meanings as well, making it what can be called a “social space.”

This ‘social space’ can be seen as a pastiche; in essence it is a place that has been infused with meaning by the individuals who occupy it. Cresswell refers to the characteristics of this social space as having “some relationship to humans and the human capacity to produce and consume meaning” (Cresswell 7). The spatial cannot be thought of independently of the social rules, limits, and
expectations of a particular social environment. In this way, the designation of activities held, or expected to be held, in certain spaces not only defines the location for an activity, but simultaneously excludes, implicitly or explicitly, activities considered inappropriate for that same space.

*In Place/Out of Place* focuses on the constructions of places through social norms that only resistant or transgressive practices reveal to human awareness, as these norms are broken. Cresswell explains how places with a purpose, a train station, a school, or a city street contain very clear cues and carry social implications regarding what does and does not belong in them. In order to skateboard, an individual must access certain, designated physical spaces. Some of these places, like skate parks, are designed and built with skateboarding in mind, whereas other places such as local pools or school playgrounds, are places designated for activities other than skateboarding. Therefore, the presence of skateboarders in a place that is not designed for them is often seen as transgressive and hostile by the hegemonic community. The skateboarders are seen as breaking the social codes embedded in the physical space; the individuals occupying the space, not the space itself, are what does not belong, what is ‘other.’ Otherness is not only a defining feature of skateboarders occupation of certain spaces but is a defining feature of the entire skateboard culture for reasons which I will discuss later.

Borden is an architectural historian whose book, *Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the Body*, focuses on skateboarding as urban practice. Borden unpacks Henri Lefebvre's theories on the construction of space,
in particular the production of social space in relation to skateboarding. Due to skateboarding’s subcultural characteristics, social space is necessary for the survival of skateboarding in the future. Therefore, a discussion of social space, its boundaries, restrictions and rules regarding its creation are inherently important when discussing skateboarding as an urban, social practice. Not only does Borden talk about social space, but also focuses on what he calls “bodily space,” “constructed space” and “subcultural spaces” all of which are themes I find to be very applicable to my experience as a skateboarder and as historically relevant.

Sibley, for his part, is a British human geographer whose book *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West*, focuses on how exclusion is a deciding factor in the creation of social spaces and spatial boundaries. Skateboarding culture, often viewed as a subculture, or a culture in opposition to the dominant societal culture, is greatly impacted by exclusion. Physical exclusion dictates where skateboarders may and may not occupy space, while social exclusion fosters the growth of an insular environment, separate from the seemingly ‘purer’ spaces for those in normative society or in positions of power.

Skateboarding is an activity and embodied lifestyle that occupies social space. It is the physical action of the skateboarders in space that reinforces their social standing in the skateboard community as well as the community at large. Therefore, they are infusing meaning into the space by their social interactions as well as their physical actions. For skateboarders, the ability to master any
given space is dictated by successfully landing various tricks and by acquiring
subcultural or skill-related knowledge. However, that same physical mastery of
space is transgressive from a hegemonic cultural point of view. Therefore, it is
important to understand that the skateboarders’ utilization of tangible space
affects their standing in various spheres of social life. The more perfect the
mastery of forbidden spaces (usually the street and other public spaces), the
more “authentic” a skater is perceived to be. Those deemed most “authentic” are
seen positively in the subcultural community but seen quite negatively by the
larger society. Thus, it is those individuals who attempt to be seen positively by
the hegemonic culture—while simultaneously taking part in a subcultural
practice—who are often considered to be non-authentic by taking their practice
to sport arenas and spaces, removed from the streets where it has its origins.

In what follows, through the application of urban spatial theory and
through a closer examination of skateboarding’s development and of Stacy
Peralta’s narrative as well as my own, I plan to explore the practice of
skateboarding via three main themes: the physical environment, embodiment
and collective experience.

The Physical Environment

Skate Parks

As the 70’s progressed and the amount of skaters grew consistently,
skatepark design and creation became “one of the 70’s most profitable business
opportunities” for skate enthusiasts and landowners across the US (Borden:
The first skate parks were modeled after pool designs and were essentially a bowl of poured or sprayed concrete on plots of abandoned land in and on the fringes of urban areas. The Carlsbad skate park, which opened in the summer of 1975 (Borden 58), was a pool-like design because vert and pool riding were the newest styles. The birth of skate parks decreased the “nuisance” that local residents felt from skateboarders’ presence in their pools. Skate parks also allowed for a new business to arise and were able to move skaters out of the urban sphere into a separate, exclusionary one.

The skate parks gradually improved the design and flow of the surfaces to offer “carefully tuned transitions and special slightly overhanging coping that had been precisely designed for skateboarding” (Borden 63). For the first time skaters felt like they were able to take advantage of elements designed specifically for skateboarding and were able to finally have a space that they helped design, allowing for them to feel that much more ownership over it. However, with these new skate parks came membership fees, entrance fees, safety waivers and park rules.

Skateboarding is an inherently anarchist sport (Borden 133). Skaters do not conform to rules that are not their own, and their rejection of restrictions imposed by society at large distinguishes them from other public space users. In fact, their rejection of the system, as well as of normative uses of space, is what often makes them the “other” in the eyes of the public. Therefore, upon the creation of these organized skate parks with rules and other sets of regulations, the skaters left. As Borden describes, “such economic and social values run
against the confrontational and anarchist tendency within skateboarding” (Borden 133).

As the skate parks continued to become more and more regulated via rules, limited hours and otherwise, the more inclined skaters were to reject the imposed parameters. This is a development that echoes Sibley’s statement that “The greater the search for conformity, the greater the search for deviance” (Sibley 39). What skate park owners and designers came to realize is that regardless of how well the skatepark may be designed, skateboarders would continue to resist the greater system of rules at play.

The original skate parks were based on the shapes of pools that skaters tended to ride but, “whatever their inventiveness, these early skate parks did not, however, offer the challenges of the pipes or backyard pools — many early skate park developers had never seen skateboarders in action” (Borden 60). The presence of the parks initially helped the skateboarder community and culture to consolidate, but the dysfunctional design of the terrain, the imperfect surfaces, and the growing number of rules didn’t ensure that these arenas would be truly embraced by skaters (Borden 62). The parks had a finite number of elements in them, and the layout was repetitive and boring to the skaters. They began to experience a sort of cabin fever for bigger and better places, like the urban environments they had originally come from. They were tired of the “consciously provided space, a mental projection and representation of skateboarding terrain” (Borden 131). Skaters, then, moved on, finding alternative terrains that they believed served their needs better. With the realization that the parks had
become unsophisticated and not attuned to the needs of skaters, new parks were built and others were improved in order to try and lure them back.

Despite their initial failure, it is important to mention what the parks succeeded in doing. The creation of these skate parks allowed owners and the local community to create a designated space, taking skaters off the streets, out of backyards and into a social space skaters had all to themselves. The positive outcomes of the creation of these spaces, however, more than anything else, also amplified the “otherness” of the skate culture.

**Otherness**

“Otherness” can be considered a social category in which “the feelings about others, the ambivalent sensations of desire and disgust which energize interpersonal and social relations, require an understanding of the self” (Sibley 11). Otherness is rooted in a dialogical model of subjectivity, and this is seen in the embodied otherness that skaters felt socially from the greater community and was also embodied physically by the walls of the skatepark. The walls provided a physical barrier for these self-selecting “others,” who would be kept from infiltrating the rest of the community; they would be enclosed and maintained within the park.

The creation of skate parks produced an “otherness” that was already inherent in skate culture. As Sibley writes, “It is necessary to examine the assumptions about inclusion and exclusion: which are implicit in the design of spaces and places. The simple questions we should be asking,” Sibley goes on,
“are: who are places for, whom do they exclude, and how are these prohibitions maintained in practice?” (X). What the skate parks did was create an incubator for skate trick creation but, at the same time, expand upon the exclusionary attitude of “otherness” that had long been associated with skateboarding. The parks created an exclusionary, secluded space that gave skaters the sense that they finally had a place of their own, when in reality the parks solidified and fenced in, literally and figuratively, these skaters from their horizons past the walls of the parks. Cresswell writes that “place does not have meanings that are natural and obvious but ones that are created by some people with more power than others to define what is and is not appropriate” (27). That is precisely what happened to skaters. Their place was defined by people with more power, more money and more control over the land.

**Benefits of Exclusion**

Cresswell talks about the unintended consequences that go along with the segregation of spaces: “The use of place to produce order,” he writes, “leads to the unintended consequences of place becoming an object and tool of resistance to that order—new types of deviance and transgression...[that] become possible” (103). The authorities and the public who hoped that creation of these parks would seclude skateboarding eventually realized that by creating these segregated, controlled spaces, they had contributed to skaters’ resistance to local culture. Instead of being pariahs, the skaters fostered a culture centered on the idea that transgression is simply an opportunity for creativity. These
skaters took a place that was to seclude them and attached meaning to it. They did what Creswell argues humans do, which is that when we “invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way (naming is one such way) it becomes a place” (Cresswell 10). For these skaters, skate parks were a home. It allowed them to forget about the rest of the world and just skate. They didn’t have to worry about being chased by police, about being judged for skating or becoming outcasts from their friends; the skate park and the people who came every day were their friends. They took space and made it a special place for themselves. They took a skate park, a place “ninety-nine percent of which were designed improperly” and where “the physics was wrong” (Peralta 2012), and, through a thoroughly creative use of it, made each one a haven to the local skaters while they were open.

**The Embodied**

**Ramp(ification)**

I don’t think I have actually ever skated in a skate park. I know where they are, I have watched people shred there, but I have never had an inkling of desire to skate one. There was always something too structured about the parks that never really appealed to me. There were rules and waivers you had to sign, only certain hours of availability to skate; it never made sense to me. In a way it still doesn’t. I remember one of the first times I realized I loved skateboarding was up in the Sierra Nevada mountains in Mammoth Lakes, California. I am a skier and snowboarder, and my family had a condo in town at the time. Being an
only child, I spent countless hours outside: riding my bike, exploring the woods and walking around the neighborhood. Coming back from exploring the backwoods creek by my house, I came across a giant wooden structure. My neighbors, a motley group of college-aged kids, had built a giant half pipe in their backyard, one that I realized later, I could see from my bedroom window. As an 8 year-old I was fascinated and for some reason had no reservations approaching the strangers. They were always outside on the back porch, listening to music, skating and smoking. I distinctly remember the smell of the backyard paradise, one of cigarettes and sweat. For some reason I decided to ask them what they were doing, as if I were their equal. They laughed at my attitude, yet their lack of concern or desire for my presence did not turn me away. I saw one or two of them were skating on the half pipe, doing different aerials, attempting to land newer and tougher tricks each go around. Their kneepads were longer than half the length of my little legs and their helmets were drenched in sweat, but I didn’t care one bit. I asked to skate with them, I wanted to learn so badly. I wanted to land those tricks. Needless to say, eight year old me did not get anywhere near the top of that 10-foot half pipe, but my neighbors did let me borrow a set of pads, a helmet and a board. I would go back and forth all afternoon on the half pipe, moving slowly but consistently, and trying to get a little higher up the wall than I had the last time.

I was always called back inside for dinner as it started to get dark out. It was embarrassing for me because I felt like my friends, my neighbors, were too cool to have their parents around and didn’t have to follow any rules but their
own. My parents always had reservations about me hanging around the half pipe.

“It’s really dangerous, Alex,” said my mother.

“I don’t really like you hanging around those kids all the time, you don’t really know them” argued my father.

But I soon realized, I didn’t have to know their names right away. It didn’t matter who they were or what their background was. I was drawn to them and what they did in the half pipe. I was obsessed with it. I knew that, no matter what, I would still go there every afternoon and dread the drive back to Los Angeles. In retrospect, I was going from my own skateboarding haven to the skateboarding mecca of the world, but that half pipe gave me something that no skate park ever could. The environment, the unspoken set of rules, and the community of people I met and felt an affinity for, was greater than anything I had ever experienced before. It was at that age that I knew skateboarding had to be part of my life; it felt inherent in my being.

**Subculture**

Subculture is defined as a group of individuals within a larger culture that distinctively differentiates its values from the hegemonic societal values (Beal 2003). In the case of skateboard culture, the skateboarders differentiate themselves from popular youth culture, athlete culture, and commodified culture. Stacy himself describes skateboarding as “the culture that doesn’t want. It’s tired of the same old paralyzing stench activities that have been going on the whole time...Music, clothes, words, mags, video, skateboarding is a lifestyle”
Stacy’s statement rings true of skate culture in the 1970s when he began riding for the Zephyr team and is still true today.

In many ways, skate culture transformed in the 1970’s because it was a haven for the rejected, the awkward, the outcasts; in fact, skateboarding is most simply a rejection of greater societal processes and organizations. While discussing Lefebvre’s lifestyle theory, Borden states:

“For like romanticism skateboarding brings together a concern to live out an idealized present, involves coded dress, language and body language, unites individuals of different social construction, and in general tries to live outside society while being simultaneously inside its very heart” (Borden: 2001,138).

Skateboard culture is centered on its ability to welcome all who are “authentic.”

Authenticity is defined not by the clothes a skater wears, the music they listen to, where they are from or what style of skating they practice. In skateboard culture, authenticity is defined by an individual’s physical skills, skate lingo abilities, passion for the sport, and the embodiment of a constructed masculinity.

The First Fall

Tony Hawk spoke of one of the first times he was trying to make it all the way up the wall of a pool. He fell, went in an ambulance, knocked his front teeth out and said “I knew right away that I was not going to quit doing this” (Peralta: 2012, 11:11). Not once did he mention what he was wearing, what kind of board he was riding, or made an excuse as to why it was his equipment rather than his ability that caused him to fall.
Tony’s determination instantly connected to me. The first skateboard I got was from the tooth fairy. I felt like the luckiest kid in the world, and I didn’t even know how to ride it yet. There was no question of whether the board was high quality or even had a good color scheme; I had a board. That was what mattered. I spent time just looking at the deck, feeling it and spinning the wheels. I would run my hands up and down the grip tape and flip the deck over to see the bright colors on the underbelly. I came to learn later that the board was a cheap Hobie set-up with an orange, purple and yellow deck. The grip tape was a shiny black, had a Hobie logo on the top and felt rough like sand paper. I got my helmet and pads, and went out that first day, ready to learn and determined to land some tricks.

Part of me felt immediately connected to the board, and I had this idea that I would pick up the technique naturally. I got out to my driveway, tried pushing off, and immediately found myself much closer to the concrete than I had been seconds before. My board made it to the end of the driveway, and I was left right where I started. I remember sitting on the ground, wind knocked out of me, wondering what just happened. No major injuries came out of the fall, but I got mad and wanted to get better. I was determined to get better. It was not the equipment’s fault, and I blamed no one for the fall. That first fall determines the fate of most skateboarders. When that fall happens, whether you are ready or not, it puts your skateboarding authenticity on the line.

I realized that the motivation to succeed on the board is more important than how you look on its deck. Why would it matter what you look like on the
board? Tony's description is what keeps me motivated to skate. I may not be the best or the prettiest skater, but I am determined to do the best I can. If you fall, you get up, not because you have to but because you want to. What I would come to find out later would be that it was not simply my skill that affected others’ perceptions of my authenticity as a skater.

**Measuring Authenticity**

Through understanding and learning about how skateboarding could be appealing to the greater youth population, corporations and skate apparel companies created a “skater” image that would sell. This fabricated individual was the simultaneous brainchild of various companies and publications, and, as mentioned earlier, inspiration drew from what was perceived to be the “authentic” skate community at the time. As Tony Alva stated in an interview, “The publishers of certain magazines didn’t want to support the way the kids really felt about skateboarding. Instead they wanted to push their ideal and their morals on the kids. They were too fashion-conscious, they homogenized what was actually happening. They weren’t even close to reality at all” (“Thrasher” 1988). Mainstreaming of their footwear, fashion and music styles caused skateboarders to reject these cultural items because they were no longer unique to the skateboard world. The idea of sponsorship, success and monetary wealth was something that skaters had never dreamed of and had never appealed to them.

Skaters did not skate to make money or make it their occupation; they skated because it was their passion. Tony Hawk explains, “When we got into
skateboarding, you did not become rich or famous if you were good at
skateboarding. No one did. No matter how good you were” (Peralta: 2012, 5:38).
The corporations created a place for the fabricated skater in the commodified
world, which took away what “authentic” subculture that the skaters had.

**Print Power**

Skate publications and videos are the most highly regarded forms of skate
media in circulation, and therefore their influence affects and impacts the
hegemonic attitude that has dominated skateboarding for so many years.
Because of its subcultural nature, skateboard magazines such as *Thrasher*,
*SkateBoarder*, *Transworld*, and *Juice* as well as skate videos produced by Powell
Peralta, Independent and Almost\(^9\) were the vehicles that maintained interest in
and expanded the influence of skateboarding across the United States. Their
photographs brought new tricks and skateboarders into the public sphere and
were a uniting force for skaters around the country and across the globe. These
publications were also the only arenas in which the “authentic” skateboard
brands would advertise their team skaters, upcoming skate videos or products.

What differentiated these advertisements and magazines from those of
their conglomerate counterparts was the lack of product in the print ads. What
the skate companies advertised was an attitude rather than a physical product,
and therefore these advertisements in particular were extremely powerful
within the skate community. These ads, like the attitudes of skaters, parodied

\(^9\) All are various, well-known skateboard gear manufacturers
and rejected the commodified skateboarder image promoted by corporations and emphasized individuality and creativity.

The above advertisement for Powell-Peralta, was featured in the August 1992 issue of Thrasher Magazine and aims to parody the commodified skate image while allowing more “authentic” opinions on the matter to glean through. Even if each individual cell is relevant, however, the images I am focusing on are numbers ten, six, and three. Each of these cells provides insight into the
discrepancies between what corporations have portrayed skateboard to be and the effects of skateboarding culture’s response and resistance.

**Authenticity and Urban Space**

Cell 10 of the ad mentions how “you can do it [skateboarding] anywhere” while displaying signs prohibiting skateboarding, and below is what I am going to call the “dog of reality.”10 The hegemonic society at play tends to create the line between inclusion and exclusion in physical and social realms, and therefore it is the subcultural society that is then reminded of their lesser status. In this case, the skateboarders are what Nevin Willard refers to as a “spatially marginalized” set of individuals. He explains how, “One of the first steps that the spatially marginalized can take to counter spatial limitations of their identity is to call attention to the fact that space is socially constructed according to specific images of who may occupy it and who may not” (Willard 332). While skateboarding may be promoted as an accessible activity for the mainstream public to take part in, this is simply a fallacy. There are designated spaces, such as skate parks, created to contain the activity from the rest of public space. It is in the construction of these enclosed spaces that the social construction of skateboarders’ space is realized. If skateboarding were available to all, then there would not be such a resistance to contain it.

Societal efforts to create designated skateboard places were to decrease skateboarders’ use of “found space” and natural spaces to practice their tricks.

---

10 I am calling this figure the “dog of reality.” Thus the dog’s ability to bite in real life signifies the way that reality bites for the “authentic” skateboarders.
When I refer to “found” or natural spaces, I am talking about areas already present in an urban environment. These places range from the concrete laden elementary schools, to empty residential pools and even stairwells and hand railings from local buildings. What connected all of these spaces and frustrated community members was that in every case, skateboarders were using these found spaces for an activity other than the place’s designated function. Society saw these spaces as usable exclusively for their designed purpose, while the skateboarders adapted their practices to the locations they came across regardless of their initial design. This form of creativity in the eyes of the skaters is seen as transgressive by the hegemonic society. There is something inherently dangerous about walking up a set of stairs while a skater is jumping off of them, but at the same time the skaters are reusing and recycling a public environment in a way that had never been thought possible. As Borden states, “the modernist space of suburbia was found, adapted and reconciled as another kind of space, as a concrete wave” (Borden 33). The other important point to emphasize is that some of these “found” spaces were part of the public environment whereas others were distinctly private.

Local pools tended to be locked or surrounded by fencing that created a boundary between the public urban environment and the privatized one. Therefore the process of gaining access to these spaces, pools in particular, made the experience more unique and definitely more transgressive and even illegal. Borden cites Lefebvre stating that, “people use space, and particularly boundary spaces of passage and encounter, to create their own social identity, and often do
so through spaces of ritual and initiation” (Borden 52). The act of breaking in to private spaces came to define the experience of vert skating and also informed skaters’ perceived selves and the way their actions were perceived by non-skaters. The experience of doing so had a ritualistic dimension that provided an identity to the space being broken into as well as to the skaters breaking in to skate it.

Despite its private nature, skaters saw enclosed spaces to be naturally appropriate for skateboarding, and the privacy of a space, socially and physically (through the use of signs like in the advertisement or more physical barriers like fencing), made the chance to skate it all the more exciting. More important than skateboarding was the opportunity to gain access to a private environment. As Sibley states, “Crossing boundaries, from a familiar space to an alien one which is under the control of someone else, can provide anxious moments; in some circumstances it could be fatal, or it might be an exhilarating experience—the thrill of transgression” (Sibley 32).

Skateboarding was seen as a reckless activity that defaced and destroyed property and skaters were seen as individuals who could not be controlled or contained in a separate space. Like the advertisement displays, signs and other forms of prevention were used to attempt and control skaters’ actions. In a way it seemed that if governmental or other official action was taken to threaten skateboarders, they would stop skating in certain environments anyways. However, despite preventative action, skaters continued to defy these warnings. Skaters knew that when breaking into private pools or other barred
environments, “it’s better to be ready for anything...ready for police, ready for the owner, for dogs, anything. Part of pool riding is the adventure of being ready for anything that’s gonna come down” (Borden 49). The negative attitudes that propelled the neighbors and authorities to try to stop skateboarding’s progression did not work to do so.

**Public Reactions to Skater Presence**

The next cell I want to focus on is number 3. Similar to the acknowledgment of the lack of spaces skaters are allowed to occupy is the reaction to skaters’ presence by the community. The image’s caption of the number 3 reason to skateboard is due to “Community involvement and close interaction with local government agencies” (Powell-Peralta 1992). The skater is seen riding away from a police officer who had apparently come to the aid of a complaining citizen. The general distaste of the public towards the skaters is represented in the woman’s fear of the skateboarder and the police officer figure threatening the skater. However, what is important to note is that it is the presence of the actual skateboard, not the individual alone that causes the distress and the frustration by those in the larger community. Willard specifically mentions, that, “Apparently a skateboard is not one of the cultural codes that identifies people as harmless and grants them access” (Willard 328) to spaces other than ones designed specifically for skateboarders. The skater in the comic leaves the scene, and is not sure what he did wrong.

---

11 Note that the police officer only, not the other woman is drawn as a pig. Similar to other marginalized groups, the skaters classify the police as pigs not people.
Some of the most well known and highly successful skaters in the world still skate local skate spots around their communities, and regardless of their fame, skill or high status in the skateboard community, societal opinions continue to overpower the skateboarders’ will to utilize the constructed spaces (buildings, stairs, railings, etc.) to create and land new tricks.

**The Marketable Image**

The next cell I focus on is cell six. With access to a skate-able location almost anywhere in the country, the sheer number of skateboarders grew exponentially in the 1990s. With such an influx of participants, corporations seized the opportunity to create a marketable, commodifiable image of skateboarding as a packaged lifestyle to be consumed by new participants. Suddenly, it seemed as if every kid walking down the street now had a skateboard in hand.

The commodification of skateboarding alongside other activities such as roller blading, Mountain biking and motocross racing, led to the birth of what is known in popular culture as “action sports.” Action sports, also commonly referred to as “extreme sports,” are marketed as such because of the perceived level of danger inherent in the activity. For skateboarding, the perceived risk is found in the speed at which a participant rides the board, the height they achieve when completing different tricks, and the variety of flips and spins associated with such complex maneuvers.
The first official sporting event designed exclusively for action sports was “The Extreme Games,” not the Olympic games as emphasized by cell nine of the advertisement. First held in the summer of 1995, “The Extreme Games,” (now simply called The X-Games) were, and still are sanctioned by ESPN. The goal of the games is to compete for a gold, silver, or bronze medal and some amount of prize money in each of the events for various action sports. In 2013 there was not only a summer X-Games, but also a winter X-Games, a yearlong action sports tour run by Mountain Dew called the “Dew Tour,” various reality television series on the lives of extreme sport athletes, and for some athletes, a very lavish lifestyle as well. Action sports are marketed as ‘cool,’ ‘dangerous,’ and ‘popular’ in order to be consumed by modern youth, but this projected image fabricated by sponsors, sports networks, and clothing companies is not indicative of the “authentic” essence of skateboarding.

Rooted in the resistance of corporate commodification, skateboarders have constantly opposed attempts by sports brands such as Nike and Adidas “to brand their products with skater “authenticity” in order to tap into the “cool” identity that many skaters cultivate” (Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie 113). Following this attempt to create a mainstreamed, yet cool image of the sport, many of those “authentic” skaters have actively sought out non-mainstream

---

12 ESPN stands for Entertainment Sports Programming Network and is owned by ABC, one of the largest broadcast corporations in the United States.
gear\textsuperscript{13}, independent or punk music, locally owned skate shops, or online zine publications to satisfy their various cultural desires alongside physical ones.

Cell six in the ad poses a commentary on this commodification of the skateboard aesthetic. There is a group of skaters\textsuperscript{14} who seem clones of one another. They clearly all purchased the same exact outfit, but evidently that is how skateboarding is “an expression of your own unique personal style” (Powell-Peralta, 1992). The implication of this ironic caption is that these “skaters” may look the part but are not “authentic” in any way. Becky Beal, in the article \textit{Authenticity in the Skateboarding World}, relies on Irving Goffman’s discussion of self-representation in relation to front and back regions. A ‘front’ region can be seen as a more public space or stage and the back region can be determined as a more private space where “style and values” are represented (Beal 351). Therefore, as Beal discusses:

“Authenticity for skateboarders is not determined by a successful front-region performance for a general audience, thereby the general audience grants authenticity to the skaters. Rather, authenticity is proven in the back region through the internalization and public display of the norms and values of the skateboard culture, which are really recognizable only to other experienced skateboarders” (Beal 351).

Thus, it is the final cell of the ad that provides the reader with the most "authentic" reason why one should skate. The cell depicts a skateboarder watching a news report expressing how skateboarding “was just a fad anyway.

\textsuperscript{13} The term gear is used to describe clothing (both fashionable and for skate purposes), protective helmets, leg and arm pads, skateboard wheels and the actual wooden or fiberglass skateboard deck.

\textsuperscript{14} Arguably, all the skaters in the image are men, but that is a discussion that is to follow in later sections.
No one really skates anymore” (Powell-Peralta 1992). However, instead of the skater in the image disagreeing with the dog of reality, in this cell, the skater and the dog agree with one another. The skater says “There’s really only one good reason why I think that anyone should skateboard” followed by the dog of reality’s response, “pure skating satisfaction” (Powell-Peralta 1992). The purpose of the final cell is to portray how inauthentic the previous ten reasons to skate are. Skating should not be done by individuals who want to look cool, make money, claim fame, impress others, etc. In fact, as the ad implies, the most authentic skaters are the ones who could care less about all the above reasons and who embody the genuine desire to skate for its own stake.

It is the embodiment of those backstage norms, attitudes, skills, etc., as Beal discusses, that determine whether a skateboarder is considered authentic or not; skateboarders’ aesthetic image does not factor into this determination. Therefore, gender performance can be identified as a front region (and part of the skate aesthetic) and not as a determinate of authenticity. While the public eye, and even other skateboarders, may consider gender performance an exception to the general definition of the front region, it becomes apparent through the female construction and performance of backstage identity, that they are in fact just as authentic as any other skater. It is the presence of a brave, competitive, spirit and the embodiment of this imagined masculinity that defines any individual as a skater.
**Female Presence**

It would appear that skateboarding’s inherent resistance to conformity and, rules would shine through in all aspects of the subcultural activity. However, skateboarding has “been oddly traditional in its membership, dominated by boys and men. Boys have been the actors; girls the watchers, admirers, and supporters” (Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie 113-114). These admiring females can be referred to as “Skate Betties” and are fringe participants in the overall schema of skateboard culture. As lookers and not players, the presence of girls in any skateboarding locale undoubtedly came with a side of sexism and an abundance of doubt from their fellow, albeit male peers. As Iain Borden explains, “While female skaters are not explicitly discouraged [from skateboarding], their relative absence is only occasionally noted and implicitly condoned” (Borden 144).

Sexism is one such cultural barrier that has continuously problematized females’ roles and abilities to be accepted in the skateboarding world. In becoming a girl skateboarder, an individual, “is to resist what R.W. Connell (1987) refers to as “emphasized femininity” [...in a way that is] off-setting the oppressive rules girls felt they “had” to follow in order to be perceived as a certain kind of (popular) girl” (Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie 114). Thus, it is the girls who skateboard who can, arguably, be considered the most “authentic” due to their constant, and seemingly never-ending, battle of resistance from the hegemonic attitudes of the greater society and of their skateboarding peers. It is through the construction of alternative identities that the female skaters are able
to be welcomed into the subcultural world that is skateboarding. Similar to the female skaters, boys who, by societal standards are seen as more effeminate, also construct an alternative masculine identity in an effort to be accepted as one of “the gang.” Consistent with the definitions used by Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie in the essay, “You Can Break So Many More Rules’: The Identity Work and Play of Becoming Skater Girls,” identity is defined as “meanings attached to the self, where meaning is seen to arise out of social interaction and shared processes of meaning making” (Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie 114). Therefore, it is through the construction of these alternative identities that girls challenge the feminine image defined by society at large and the claims made by professional skateboarders like Christian Hosoi15, that women should not be allowed to skate at all. Therefore, gender may seem like a defining factor in ones ability to gain recognition; however, this is not the case. In fact, it is in the embodiment of any authentic form of masculinity and knowledge of subcultural practice that separates the skateboarders from the sell-outs.

**Do they Exist?: Female Presence in the Media and the Skate Park**

Despite the power and influence that skateboard publications and videos have over the skate community, they continually refer to skaters by strictly male pronouns such as he, his, him, etc. (Borden 2001) and fail to provide much, if any, exposure to the female skate scene.

---

15 Christian Hosoi, a professional skateboarder since the age of 14, is considered one of the all time great skateboarders of the 1980s and 1990s. Known for his big aerial tricks and wild lifestyle, Hosoi started his own skateboard company age 17 and is the inventor of tricks such as the *Christ Air* and *Rocket Air.*
The ad above, interestingly enough, also presented by Powell-Peralta in *Thrasher Magazine*\(^\text{16}\) not only promotes Powell-Peralta skateboards but also attempts to promote female presence in the skate world. While the pink tinge of the ad evokes conventional femininity, the rest of the ad shows female skateboarders

\(^\text{16}\) It is interesting to note that among skateboard companies, Powell Peralta has publicly supported female skateboarders, despite the male-centric themes of many of their portrayals. In a similar ad, they promote “just some skateboarders;” however, in this image there is not a single female present (Borden 146).
appropriating “the traditionally masculine traits of physical strength and bravery, technical competence, physical risk-taking and stoicism, as well as non-sexualized androgyny (Read: masculine dress style)” (Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie 116) in a way that depicts them as authentic in the context of skateboard subculture. The initial evidence that acknowledges an active distancing from emphasized femininity is the headline of the ad that reads, “Some girls play with dolls. Real women skate” (Powell-Peralta 1988). This statement, emphasized by the contrasting black font and capital lettering, rejects “traditional femininity outright by [...] avoiding ‘girly stuff’” (Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie 116). Girls are so often confined to the objects and mentality prescribed to them by the hegemonic society that they are unable to break from the cycle of traditional femininity. However, what this ad promotes is not only for girls to break out of that mold, but also to create the identity that works for them. In this case, the created identity is of an authentic skater. It is through various outlets of expression that alternative femininities are created. However, depending on the hegemonic culture in an individual’s specific locale, the outlets used to construct this alternative identity, and the inspiration to form such an identity, differs.

American female skateboarders embody their alternative, or, as Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie describe, “expanded” femininity in aesthetic and cultural ways. In their appearance alone it becomes evident that unlike their girly classmates, female skateboarders make it clear “through their style, [that] they wanted to “be their own person” to “stand out” (by wearing all orange or safety pins as earrings) or to be “funky” (by dying their hair blue or wearing and
“explosive shirt”). But they were equally clear that their primary purpose was not to attract the attention of boys” (Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie 119). The girl skaters celebrate their individuality through their outfits and resist the stereotype that they are “Skate Betties.” Not only do the girls use their aesthetic to portray their resistance of emphasized femininity, their lack of brand name clothing (skateboard brands and common name brands) promotes the girls’ authentic value in the skateboard world generally. The girls do not look like they are trying to impress boys and their clothing is not mainstream either, thus exemplifying values of a “true” skateboarder.

In a similar vein to the clothing that girls wear in an effort to portray their constructed identity are the bruises and scrapes they wear on their bodies and the attitudes that come along with them. Skateboarding is an activity that regardless of age, gender or skill requires balance, strength, patience and bravery. In order to learn how to skate properly and advance to the next level, skaters must fail; and in failing, comes falling. Even when doing basic tricks foundational to the sport, falling and injury is a constant risk (Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie 117). While these skill do no necessarily classify as masculine, “As Iris Marion Young (1989) suggests, typical motility and spatiality for girls can be timid, uncertain, and hesitant, as many girls are not brought up to have the same kind of confidence and freedom in their movements as boys” (Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie 117). By willingly risking their safety in an effort to land a trick, girl skaters are proving that they are able to keep up with their male counterparts. Sexist comments and taunting is typical of boy skaters generally, and this is
directed, in particular towards the female skaters. However, it is through physical injuries and proven skill that boys are able to accept a girl’s presence at the skate spot. Not only does this acceptance allow girl skaters to be seen as authentic, but they are able to embody a similar confidence and attitude that “requires a great deal of commitment, fearlessness, and the ability to stand up to boys who may not be welcoming. [...] Yet in being a skater, girls not only forge powerful individual identities; they also create and take advantage of collective opportunities to rewrite the rules of girlhood” (Kelly, Pomerantz and Currie 123).

What Girl Skaters?

None of my favorite skateboarders are girls. None of them ever have been girls. If you ask me what girl skateboarders I know, the grand total would be two. The first would be Peggy Oki, the first female rider on the original Zephyr team, and the second would be Lizzy Armanto, a young phenom that is an X-games champion and is sponsored by the company I bought my most recent board from, Penny Australia. I am a girl, consider myself a feminist (especially due to my all-female secondary school experiences), but when it comes to skateboarding, the culture for me does not revolve around women. Skateboarding does not focus much around racially, sexually, economically or physically diverse individuals either; skateboarding is imagined as a primarily white, male-dominated activity. Yet, all of us are part of a subculture that defines us as outcasts.
You always knew the kids who were skateboarders were different than the kids who labeled themselves as “the skater type.” The wannabes bought certain brands of clothing and a cheap deck to fit in, but this was never the case. Skate media was the arena where real skaters were recognized, and the brands and clothing are how posers attempted to buy into the culture. I am not a boy, and I am not inherently masculine in nature, yet I am still classified as a skateboarder. I can’t do an Ollie, and I have not broken bones because of riding, yet I am not a poser. What is it, then, that fuels the subcultural fire that is modern skateboarding, and how do members of such a culture decide who is authentic enough? Is there space for those who do not fit into the typical skater image? And how do you discern the sellouts from the loyal guys? Is there place for a girl, a homosexual, and a foreigner in the skateboarding world?

Even in other countries, namely Sweden and Canada where gender is much more evenly distributed in all activities, skateboarding maintains a very distinct aesthetic and attitude. The aesthetic shows the grungy, male outcast and the attitude tends to be centered around a big “fuck you” to “the man.” As a sport and a culture that prides itself on its subculture aesthetic, the only way skateboarding has a way of maintaining its life is through intra-sport relations and media.

When you type “top female skateboarders” into the Google search box, the first link that comes up is titled “The 10 Sexiest Female skateboarders.” At

---

17 I refer to these individuals as posers or wannabes to maintain the distinction from skateboarders
18 The wooden base of a skateboard is referred to as the deck
first I was confused; I pressed the back button and double-checked what I had searched for (because Google is infamous for its auto-finish searches), and I, in fact, had not made any typos. When searching for the best, the Internet tells you about the sexiest. I am not ashamed that I do not know many female skaters, and in some ways, I never really expected to know them either. Skateboarding is about finding oneself amidst the mundane, to find what you personally find to be the most sacred. But the thing with skateboarders is that they tend to be the outcasts in some way or another. I always played with the boys, I thought scrapes and bruises were cool and I would do whatever it took to be a part of “the gang.” But then again, I always knew I was different. I could try and try and try, but I needed to find something of my own: a passion, a calling that would allow me to succeed on my own terms. Skateboarding does that for me. Skateboarding and the passion for it allow me to have an outlet where I can compete, succeed, fail, and live on my own terms.

Creating the Collective

Why a Team:

Skateboarding is an inherently individual sport. Skateboarders my be on a “team,” but more than a collective sport with a single goal, the team in the skateboarding world serves as a collective of individuals that compete against one another, push each other to skate harder and support each other. Steve Caballero, a member of The Bones Brigade says, “I liked being on a team. I liked being in a group of guys competing against each other but at the end of the
competition leaving as friends and a team” (Peralta: 2012, 20:02). In skateboarding, there are a variety of competition styles. By the time the 1980s came around there were separate freestyle, vert and street style skateboard events within a single competition. For Stacy, the goal behind The Bones Brigade was to build a collective of skaters who could master all aspects that encapsulate skateboarding style. Instead of having a team of skaters who all competed in the same event, Stacy organized a team that skated in a variety of events. While some members competed in multiple events within a single competition, Stacy found a skateboarder to develop in all realms of the sport.

Stacy Peralta, through his experience on the Zephyr team, and as an individual professional skater, acquired a knack for distinguishing between the posers and the skaters. His goal was to create a team that would last, not one that would fall apart due to fame, fortune, or business troubles at the shop. For the Zephyr team, the Zephyr skate shop going out of business was the final nail on the coffin, but the team was dead long before. In his personal recollections Stacy explains how “the moment that team [the Z-Boys] tasted success, it blew apart” (Peralta: 2012). The Zephyr team was full of skaters who were loyal to skating and the team until the chance to get sponsored and make some money came along. It became clear that the skaters were still in it for fame, not for what skateboarding had given each of them emotionally, socially or otherwise. Skateboarding for them was simply just for show.

It was upon experiencing and watching his friends and teammates lose sight of their skateboarding passion for fame and some money which
reinvigorated Stacy’s passion for the sport and solidified his goal to create a team of authentic, passionate skaters that would last. As Sibley describes, it is the “feelings about others, the ambivalent sensations of desire and disgust which energize interpersonal and social relations” (Sibley 11). Stacy became acutely aware of these feelings and through self-reflection, realized the desire to create a skate team. Sibley refers to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton who discuss how objects inanimate and animate have the ability to influence the definition of the self. In particular they explain, “In the everyday traffic of our existence, we can also learn about ourselves from objects, almost as much as from people” (Sibley: 10). It was through Stacy’s existence and experience through the fall of the Zephyr team that he was afforded the chance to continue to define and refine his own self-embodiment. It is often through experience that one learns not to repeat past mistakes, and for Stacy it was the collapse of the Zephyr team. He found the team important, authenticity imperative, and success an added bonus.

Stacy was attempting to build a skateboard team that defied the image that was continually perpetuated and advertised by corporations. When speaking to his art director, Craig Stecyk, on what the name of this enterprise should be, Stacy specifically stated “I don’t want to call this a team, and I do not want the word skateboarding in the name of it” (Peralta 2012). He was not attempting to acquire a group of skaters who could become ‘sell-outs’ upon the first taste of success, he wanted skaters who were able to find their niche in the skateboarding world and as a result be successful. Tony Hawk, in The Bones Brigade Documentary mentions how “Anyone who was trying to create a team
[at the same time as Stacy] was just stealing skaters that were already 
established” (Tony Hawk: 9:07). In essence, these teams, while stacked with 
talent, were nothing but a recombination of current professionals. These teams 
were not created for up-and-comers, only the experienced. However, Stacy did 
nearly the opposite when building the Bones Brigade. He did not pick skaters 
that had been seen before; he did not even pick skaters that were on the 
professional circuit. He explicitly states, “I didn’t want any skateboarder anyone 
even knew on my team. I wanted this to be no name guys that no one had ever 
seen. So I started picking up young amateurs that I knew I could develop” 

There was concern in building a team from nothing, taking kids that were 
not known and clearly so young. A skate journalist described the team in the 
following terms: “Not only were they unknown, but they were all picked as a 
very young crew. You know some of them were in grade school sort of thing” 
(Peralta: 2012, 9:46). These ‘kids’ were initially seen as infiltrating a more adult 
space, adult in terms of age but also in experience. Sibley discusses the idea of 
boundary crossing, in particular the challenges that face adolescents attempting 
to break into the adult sphere. It is made clear:

“The boundary separating child and adult is a decidedly fuzzy one. 
Adolescence is an ambiguous zone within which the child/adult 
boundary can be variously located according to who is doing the 
categorizing. Thus, adolescents are denied access to the adult 
world, but they attempt to distance themselves from the world of 
the child.” (Sibley 35)

Due to skateboarding's predominantly adolescent following and participation, 
the entrance of what seemed like children into the pro circuit was not well
received. Established skaters saw the sheer presence of these kids as an insult to their skills and manhood. This hegemonic attitude had been typical of older skaters. However, it took simply watching The Bones Brigade team skate for those opinions to be shattered. The Bones Brigade team embodied a form of masculinity and toughness that qualified them as authentic despite their ages and years of experience. They may have been young or scrawny, but each member of the team was what Stacy describes as “a kid who had a fire in him. Like the reason I put Tony Hawk on the team was I saw him walk out of a pool one day taking his board behind him and he had such an incredible look of disappointment on his face; disappointment in himself. And I went, ‘I want that kid’” (Peralta: 2012, 10:33). These kids may not have appeared masculine, most of them had not even hit puberty yet, but they had a drive, toughness, and attitude that allowed them to forge a masculinity of their own.

Establishment and Awkwardness:

Generally, “skateboarders create their own subculture: a social world in which self-identifying values and appearances confront controversial codes of behavior” (Borden 137). Therefore, even as a community of “others,” there are rules, expectations and even rivalries enforced within the skate world. This idea of rivalry, geographically, physically, and socially, was evident between skateboard teams and throughout the creation of The Bones Brigade. Not only was Stacy building a team from young amateurs, but also the team’s image challenged the current image and attitude of the skateboard world at the time:
This is also how skateboarders ultimately confront the twin problems of alienation and the construction of self-identity. Skaters are alienated by the externally rational world that they are told, as young adults, they must learn about and participate within. Skateboarding, however, encourages them to construct relations with others and the city according to their own values. In isolation, from non-skaters but in company with other skaters, skateboarding for them, as does any subculture, produces both new alienations and new groupings; and in terms of social power, skating redefines the site or objective of change such that skaters get power over something, seeking a place over which they have control: a place which is neither school, family, home, nor place of work (168).

Other skaters like Tony Alva and Christian Hosoi created teams at a similar time as Stacy. However, the creation of the Alva Posse and Team Hosoi projected an image and attitude popular among skateboarders while The Bones Brigade is what Tony Hawk describes as, “a home of misfits” (Peralta: 2012, 19:22).

The Bones Brigade was not attempting to reside within the confines of the standardized, hegemonic skateboard image. Instead, like skateboarding in relation to greater youth culture, The Bones Brigade “set up their own semi-conventionalized rules of behavior” (Borden 168). It was as if The Bones Brigade was creating its own subcultural space within the subculture of skateboarding.

The team setting provided a sense of collective determination, but unlike other teams, Stacy was determined to retain the individuality and personality of his skaters, especially as the skateboarding world continued to be commodified. In fact,

While some manufacturers have occasionally tried to create a co-ordinated narrative form— such as the tongue-in-cheek Powell-Peralta ‘Bones Brigade’ military team imagery of the early 1980’s — more usually, subculture is developed through a series of complementary but unconsciously co-ordinated worlds, composed of clothes, music, stickers, board design, language and other forms of communication (Borden 152)
What the distinct reaction to The Bones Brigade from the skateboard world portrayed was how even within skateboarding’s subcultural environment, skaters were somewhat expected to embody a “totalizing self-identity” (Borden 165) shared by the whole community. Therefore it is crucial to understand that team loyalty was present in the skateboarding world, and skateboarders had a favorite team they liked more than others. Competitions would have a sea of spectators in favor of the Alva Posse, opposing fans in favor of team Hosoi. In a way, the image of these teams superseded the image of the individual skaters on their rosters. The collective, team-focused environment inherent in The Bones Brigade provided these skateboarders the ability to remain outside of the continually standardized image of subculture and maintain their individuality. Therefore, Bones Brigade fans cheered for all members of the team, not simply because of the team image, but because they were a fan of each individual skater and what skills and tricks made them each unique. The team was a unifying entity, but Stacy focused on promoting individual skaters and the style, tricks and image that made them special. The individuals formed the team on The Bones Brigade, whereas for others, the team shaped the individual.

**Conclusion**

My parents never wanted me to be a skateboarder. They saw it as way too dangerous and a burnout sport, or maybe not even a sport at all. They put me in organized sports for as long as I can remember, and the structure was necessary
for my success. I spent endless hours doing basketball, baseball, volleyball and soccer drills with a desire to skate. Now, do not get me wrong, I love those sports. I captain the varsity softball team in college, and I have a passion for the game, but these organized activities never satisfied all of my passions. Skateboarding is the opposite of what I grew up on and what I constantly wanted to do.

I was told how “silly” it was to want a subscription to any of the skateboarding magazines, but I never let that shut me out of the skate media completely. I was always very strategic in how I gained access to Transworld and SkateBoarder.

Every Sunday my mother would go grocery shopping, and, as her child, it was my responsibility to join her for the weekly excursion. We would go up and down every aisle, in the same pattern week after week. It was as if I had a perpetual countdown in my mind that began the moment we entered, and would not stop till check out. The check out line was my favorite part of the trip. I was always hopeful for a busy day. If it was a busy day the lines would be long and I would have more time to absorb.

The magazines in my local supermarket were placed just outside the checkout lines, allowing me to remain in my mother’s line of sight but providing me with a few minutes of freedom from the mundane task at hand. I would go straight to the bottom, right corner of the magazine rack; it was as if the magazines’ locations were burned in my mental map. Instantly I would pick up the magazine that I had not been able to finish on last week’s visit and find
where I had left off. I had to get through the magazine in four visits, before the next issue arrived on the shelves.

The moment I began reading was the same moment I forgot about how boring the last 45 minutes had been; finally, I was in utopia. Until I heard, “Okay, Alex, it is time to go.” Back to reality, back to the car to load the groceries and home we went. For that brief moment of time, however, I was immersed within the lives of my heroes; I forgot about the fact that I was standing in a grocery store, at a magazine rack, on a Sunday afternoon.

Being an only child, I think there was a fear from both my parents and myself about how to spend my free time. They had one child and would never have wanted me to end up in trouble, to be troubled, or with the wrong crowd. But what is the ‘wrong’ crowd anyways?

I always had to watch the X-games in another room, there was a tony Hawk poster in my bedroom, and I dreamed of flying high. My most recent purchase (thanks to my parents) was a Lance Mountain signed deck that was the first run of the reissued Bones Brigade skateboards. Before convincing my parents why I needed the deck so desperately, I had to explain who Lance was, why he is so important, and how he has impacted the skating world. I had to legitimize someone who is a father, a provider, an entrepreneur, and a world traveler, aside from being a professional skateboarder.

What I realized in that moment was this: The place a skateboarder calls home is nowhere you can find on a map. There is no enclosed area that they gather, nor is there is a mecca for them to travel to. A skater’s place is
encapsulated in the magazines, the videos, and, most importantly, in the minds of the next generation of young skaters. Despite arguments of where they can and cannot skate, if they are lazy or not, if they do drugs, and if they wreck the neighborhood, skaters continue to succeed because of the legacy they constructed. Stacy was part of the first generation that created the opportunity for a legacy to even become a possible reality, and he solidified the continuation of a legacy in the creation of The Bones Brigade.

The continued legacy of skateboarding is what skaters care about more than anything. It is the thing that no government can fine you for and no neighbors can complain about; skaters have a love in their hearts for what they do, and they will go to the ends of the earth to continue doing it. Sure, skateboarders have a distinct dislike for the sellouts and resent the corporations who do not give back to the skate community they commodify, but at the end of the day the skateboarding community remains. The community is not a physical space, however. It is a place for skateboarding to live on and grow; it has meaning and therefore is greater than concrete.

It is important to note that the skateboard community is not a team, and skateboarding is in no way a team sport like baseball, basketball, etc. The Bones Brigade was a collective of skaters that, while considered a team, all competed independently and against one another. The Bones Brigade was simply the larger sponsorship (alongside added skill development by their coach, Stacy) that connected the individual skaters to one another. However, the important fact is that despite being on a team, independence within competition and
personal style remained.

Unlike team sports where the performance of one individual affects the outcome of the collective, skateboarders’ results in a competition were solely dependent on the individual skater’s performance. And despite the fact that competition within skateboarding does exist and is a feature of the professional skate circuit, competition is not a defining feature of the sport. By and large, skateboarders do not skate for the competition, they do not skate to win. Being the best is measured by personal standards, and there are no benchmarks that dictate one person as being a better skater than another. What matters is that they are constantly skating and that they are doing what matters to them and no one else.

Skaters invent their own tricks and create their own style. There is no book that can teach someone how to skateboard the “correct way” like other sports. There is no right way and there is no wrong way to learn how to skateboard. What matters is that someone continues to practice, continues to foster a passion for the activity and fosters the desire to get better.

There is an avoidance of the cutthroat, rule-based competition that so heavily influences the direction of more organized sports. The beauty in skateboarding is the inherent freedom to create and transform in whatever way one so chooses. This may be embodied in the development of new tricks, new slang or new skate style. However, with the enforcement and regulation of rules, competition organization, and team formats, it is possible that what today’s skateboarders consider the “essence of authenticity” in skateboarding will be
lost.

Skateboarding will continue to transform, whether it be in a newly discovered style or a type of trick; there is no question about that. But what is unknown is how it will change. I am hopeful that the presence of such a creative and open environment will foster the maturation and transformation of skating in some way positive. Why am I so sure that it will be positive? Because given the freedom to create, skateboarding can only be restricted by itself.
Works Cited


