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The city and the subculture career: Professional street skateboarding in LA

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Ethnography

00(00) 1-24

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DOI: 10.1177/1466138111413501

eth.sagepub.com



Abstract

This article provides a detailed ethnographic description of skateboarding's main career opportunities and contributes to arguments about subculture theory and the impact of specific subcultures on cities. Professional street skateboarders perform tricks on obstacles in the urban environment and publish these tricks in magazines and videos to share with other members of the subculture. This need for documentation and dissemination of skateboard tricks, as well as the need to design and distribute subculture media, skateboards and skateboarding products, makes skateboarding a self-sustaining industry and provides skaters with an opportunity for subculture careers. These careers are in skating and also the ancillary careers necessary to support this industry. These subculture careers have a positive impact on individual skaters by providing opportunities, in many cases where none existed, and also upon the urban centers where this industry is most prominent by drawing creative, talented people to the city to participate in the subculture and quite possibly even make a career.

Keywords

skateboarding, subculture career, subculture media, urbanism, subculture studies, subculture enclave

Prologue

July 2008. It is a beautiful, Wednesday afternoon in sunny Los Angeles. Aaron Snyder (34), my younger brother by eight years, and former professional street skateboarder, has brought us to one of his secret illegal skate spots to photograph a 'backside tail slide'. The 'spot' is a cement aqueduct in Culver City located behind a

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grocery store, just under the 405 Freeway. Despite the whizzing cars above, the place is quite serene. Mr Brainwash¹ has stenciled 'you are beautiful' on the wall but Aaron, who re-constructed this spot, calls it 'the death ledge'.

It is rare for street skateboarders to find spots to perform tricks that are hassle-free from cops and citizens. It is illegal to skateboard on California streets, so skaters often go to great lengths to find 'spots'. However, although it is technically illegal to skate here, most likely the worst that could happen is that we'd be forced to leave.

This spot has never been skated before and work needed to be done to make it 'skateable'. Two weeks prior Aaron used a power leaf blower to clean all the debris. On the second day he marked off a spot on the ledge, painted it with industrial grade, grey primer, sanded it smooth, and then waxed it. The point of this process was to make the rough cement surface smooth so his skateboard will slide on it.

The purpose of all this effort is to shoot a photograph of a trick to be included in *The Skateboard Mag* magazine. This will be used to advertise Aaron's 'Mag Minute', curated by photographer Shad Lambert, a one-minute collection of tricks that will be shown on the magazine's website.

Shad has a massive camera bag which he tells me holds approximately \$25,000 in camera equipment, which he has accumulated over time. His main camera is a Canon 5D HD-SLR, there are also three lenses, multiple lights with radio controlled flash setups, tripods to hold the lights, filters and other gadgets.

Shad decides that the best place to shoot Aaron's trick is from up on the hill looking down on him so the viewer can get a real sense of the space. The problem with this spot is that there is a fence in the way, however, Aaron gets bolt cutters from his car and snips a tidy one foot square opening in the fence. Now Shad can poke his head and camera through to get the shot.

Shad then goes about rigging his lights. It is a bright sunny day but he needs a flash to stop the action. He rigs a light on a tripod and instructs Aaron where to put it. He also gives fellow skateboarder Billy Roper a light to hold. Both lights are connected to the photographer's camera via remote control and are set to go off when he presses the shutter.

Aaron then proceeds to 'ollie' up to the 18-inch ledge, and turn his body and the skateboard 'backside' (back facing the obstacle) in such a way as to slide the wooden tail of his skateboard approximately 2.5 feet, and then 'pop' (ollieing once again) off the ledge. In the event that Aaron misses badly he could fall 15 feet down, therefore you *must* keep this critical fact out of your mind.

According to Aaron, this is not a super-difficult trick, but to an outsider it appears highly complex, and a bit impossible. Just the simple 'ollie', which is the foundation of street skateboarding, employs Newton's Third Law of motion, and is completely counter-intuitive. The skater stands on the board moving forward with the back foot on the tail and the front foot over the bolts. He jumps up into the air while thrusting the tail of the board down onto a hard surface like the street. The skater hovers over it in the air, for an instant, essentially waiting for the 'equal and opposite inverse reaction' to occur, as the board comes up, the skater slides his front foot forward to level the board out. The amount of downward force applied

to the tail is the exact amount of height or ‘pop’ the board will get off of the ground. (I have tried this maneuver over and over for the last three years, and have been unable to make even minimal progress.)

In pro skating it is not enough to just land the trick; you must also have style. The trick has to look good, and by the fourth or fifth unsuccessful attempt, the pressure on Aaron to land the trick perfectly begins to mount. And, as he becomes fatigued, the possibility of real injury increases. In this way skateboarding is more like a movie shoot than a sport. The skater must perform the trick with camera and crew waiting around, all wanting to see the trick completed before we get kicked out of the spot, the cops come, or we lose the light (Figure 1).

Finally, Aaron lands the trick to his satisfaction, and Shad shows him the digital image in the back of the camera to confirm. We quickly pack up and drive to the second spot, ‘the texas gap’, at a church on Texas Avenue in West LA. Skateboarding comprises a broad range of styles, from technical or ‘tech’, which requires super-intricate board control and balance, and are most often done on ‘ledges’, ‘manual pads’, and smaller ‘gaps’, to the incredibly dangerous, or ‘gnarly’, skaters who do less technical tricks, but on ridiculously massive obstacles. While both styles are dangerous, ‘gnarly’ skaters make up for a lack of technical skill, by taking on way more risk, while technical skaters make up for a lack of physical danger by performing incredibly complicated maneuvers (Figure 2).



Figure 1. The production of a skateboard trick.



Figure 2. Aaron Snyder, 'backside tailslide', photo courtesy of Shad Lambert.

Only a handful of skaters, like Paul Rodriguez, Andrew Reynolds, Chris Cole, Nyjah Houston, Eric Kosten and Shane O'Neil, can do both; incredibly technical tricks, on incredibly big obstacles. (All of the above are incidentally millionaires.)

The 'texas gap' is the new hot spot for skaters who go big. It is six feet high, and you must clear at least 13 feet to the landing area, so only the gnarliest pros and the young chargers trying to make a name for themselves, will even attempt it because it's so intimidating. When we arrive at the 'session', Alex Gordorous (17), a new 'am' or sponsored amateur, for Foundation Skateboards, is hurling himself over the 'gap' and each 'fakie 360°' attempt ends in a bone-crunching fall on the cement. There are approximately 50 tricks which make up the foundation of skateboarding. Each of the tricks vary in difficulty and most of the tricks can be combined with other tricks to create new ones. A 'fakie 360° ollie' for example, is actually a 'fakie ollie' and a '360 ollie' combined. Essentially a 'fakie 360° ollie' is a 360° twist while riding fakie (backwards), so you're ollieing with you're dominant foot, off the front of the board, and spinning your body with it 360°.

Each time he approaches the obstacle I am filled with anxiety. I don't want to witness a gruesome injury, but I also don't want to miss it if he is successful. After at least 20 attempts, Alex sits down on his board and stops trying. He is bruised, battered, and deflated. This is the second time that the obstacle has beaten him and it's clear that the knowledge that he'll have to heal up and come back another day, weighs on him heavily (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Alex G., fakie 360 at the ‘texas gap’.

Three months later I’m flipping through the pages of *The Skateboard Mag*, (2008) and I come across Shad’s photo of Aaron that I witnessed. In June 2009 in *The Skateboard Mag* I see a beautiful photo of Alex’s finally completed ‘fakie 360° ollie’ over the ‘texas gap’, along with an interview, written by Shad Lambert.

Introduction

Such is the game of professional street skateboarding, not only does the photographer get paid by the magazine and the skater by his sponsors for ‘coverage’, but these published tricks increase the reputations of these skaters and their potential earnings. The process and production of professional street skateboarding, which includes the need for documentation and dissemination of skateboard tricks through subculture media, as well as the need for design and distribution of skateboard products, has created career opportunities for subculture participants.

The job of the professional street skateboarder is to successfully complete skateboarding tricks according to the dictates of their interests, skills and style, on urban obstacles that meet very specific criteria. These tricks are documented by videographers and photographers and are produced for the various skateboard magazines and videos. The best tricks are published in the most prestigious journals and from these published feats, sponsorship, money, and other rewards flow.

This need for a subculture media, as well as the design and distribution of skateboards and skateboard products, produces numerous ancillary careers within the subculture, not unlike an 'art world' (Becker, 1982) which includes, not only professional skaters, but 'filmmakers', photographers, video editors, writers, journalists, shoe designers, clothing designers, graphic artists, team managers, and company owners, to name a few. This article articulates this process of subculture career making and attempts to understand some of the affect that subcultures have on the cities in which they are most prominent.

In addition, this article looks closely at skateboarding and at the collective impact of subculture careers on cities and shows that, more than petty vandalism and exaggerated claims of destruction, skateboarding creates opportunity for skaters the world over and draws highly talented people to cities like Los Angeles, to participate and have a career in skateboarding subculture.

On a theoretical level this article will synthesize research that has been done on subcultures and cities. In doing so, I will apply urban sociologists' notion of the ethnic enclave, to show that distinct subcultural enclaves exist in major cities across the world. This article will show that in places where subcultures exist and persist, like graffiti writing in New York City, or skateboarding in Los Angeles, subcultural enclaves create and sustain subculture careers.

Method

This article is part of a larger, long-term ethnographic study, and is the result of intense engagement in the field of skateboarding subculture. For over a decade I have followed skateboarding subculture and specifically the professional career of my younger brother and main contact, Aaron Snyder. In the summer of 2008 I began a serious ethnographic study of skateboarding subculture. I spent two weeks in the field in Los Angeles researching skateboarding, and returned in the summer of 2009, and again in the winter and spring of 2010.² Each time in Los Angeles I stayed with my brother Aaron, whose world is solely about skateboarding which allowed me almost complete immersion in the culture.

Aaron began skating when he was nine years old, and soon thereafter announced that this was what he would do with his life. He began skateboarding in Madison, Wisconsin and in 1995 when he was 18, moved to San Diego, California to try and become a professional skateboarder. He was initially sponsored by Maple Skateboards, and then in 1997 moved on to Shorty's Skateboards, where he had a video part in the extremely influential video 'Fulfill the Dream'.

In 2001 he turned pro for Darkstar Skateboards and moved to Los Angeles. Today, at 34 years old he is no longer a fully sponsored professional but he continues to skate and film tricks. He co-owns a 'hardware' company that sells the nuts and bolts that attach the skateboard 'deck' to the 'trucks', and he is active in the design of skate plazas in Los Angeles. He has transferred his skill at editing skateboard videos into a job as a video editor for a reality television show. He is well respected for both his skateboarding skills and his knowledge of the culture and

was recently hired as a judge for the prestigious 'Street League' skateboarding competition, which aired on espn2. He also blogs for the skateboard site, Digital.

My two other main contacts are RB Umali, a skateboard cinematographer in New York City where I live, and Atiba Jefferson, an accomplished skateboard photographer in Los Angeles. I met these gentlemen in 1998 when Aaron was in New York shooting tricks for the 1998 video, 'Fulfill the Dream'. I maintained these relationships over the years and was able to expand on them for this project. I also had long informal dinner interviews with RB in New York City (11 February 2010) and with Atiba in Los Angeles (18 February 2010). I tell their stories in this article in order to highlight the importance of the subculture media for the purpose of establishing subculture careers.

My brother provided complete access to his world and I was able to learn in a shorter time what under normal field circumstances might have taken years. Unlike ethnographic relationships in which a good amount of time and energy must be spent toward establishing trust and developing a rapport, working with my brother allowed me to skip this phase and jump immediately into the deep end of the subculture.

My relationship with my brother however, changed. No longer was I the older brother sharing my knowledge about the world with my little brother, instead I was the neophyte and Aaron was the expert. Aaron takes seriously his ongoing role as my teacher, and quite frankly seems to cherish this change in our roles.³ When I am in his world, I am not a professor, or author, or elder, I am simply someone who doesn't skate.

Most times when around other skaters Aaron introduces me simply as his older brother who is 'working on a book', and no further questions are asked. I am free to take photos, shoot videos and ask questions, and reveal my role as a researcher in my own time. In fact I don't even need what my students and I have called a 'pick up line', the prepared statement researchers use to explain themselves and their reason for intruding; I just do my best to observe and stay out of the way (Fine, 1993; Whyte, 1947).

Working with a sibling can be difficult. For one, I've got to let my younger brother tell me what to do, and this requires a suspension of self, which can be challenging and stressful. When I am with Aaron, I also become consumed with everything skating, and during those times I have trouble processing all of the information and even remembering what I'm about. When you do fieldwork in your own city, you can remove yourself from the field setting, decompress, and become yourself again, when you are living with your informants, every moment is a learning opportunity, so you have to be okay with the fact that there is no chance to just 'be yourself'. This has long been a challenge for anthropologists but is one fewer sociologists have had to endure (Rose, 1987, 1990; Venkatesh, 2002).

Techniques

In my research on graffiti writers in New York City (2009), I used a sketchbook to allow writers to illustrate certain words, which instigated a dialogue between myself

and my contacts. This sketchbook or blackbook, which cultural criminologists call an 'interactive device' (Ferrell and Hamm, 1998) allowed me to witness graffiti without encouraging criminal activity, and it inspired writers to teach me about their culture. In this research on skateboarding I began by asking skaters to take me to photograph some of LA's most famous 'skate spots'. This method allowed the skaters to teach me about their specific uses of urban architecture without having to risk injury or arrest.

Through this process I began to develop a foundation of knowledge about skateboarding history, tricks and spots. This gave me a vocabulary to talk with skaters about their subculture, which helped to develop some trust (Polsky, 1969). I transferred these photos to my iPhone and was able to easily show skaters these photos, which then instigated discussions of their subcultural landmarks (Collier, 1967; Harper, 1987).

These strategies borrow from Collier's (1967) technique of 'photo elicitation', which is the practice of using photographs in research interviews. This method allows informants the opportunity to act as teachers, describing to the researcher what the photos show. In my case it was also proof that I was diligently trying to learn about skateboarding.

These techniques compliment more traditional ethnographic practices of participant observation and writing field notes. Each night I would write a short outline and the following morning would spend roughly three hours writing up a detailed narrative of the previous day. In some cases I would read my notes to my brother, or ask for clarification on certain things.

Through these processes I was introduced to other skaters including, Mike Plumb a.k.a Lizard King, Brian Hansen, Don Ngyuen, Billy Roper, Brian Lotti, Billy Rohan, Marko Jazbinsek, Matt Gotwig, Kimathi Smith, Yuto Kojima as well as photographers Shad Lambert, Atiba Jefferson and filmmaker R.B. Umali. I also continued to follow these folks through social media sites like Facebook and Twitter.

There were also trips to skateparks, skateboard contests and endless film sessions watching videos of skateboarding. In my time in the field I was able to photograph approximately 50 of the hundreds of skate spots in the LA area and took more than 300 photographs and 20 videos of skaters and skateboarding.

While many researchers talk about the power of photography and the use of visual imagery in their scholarship (Hayward and Presdee, 2010), I have found that cameras are also an excellent 'interactive device'. In my case the goal is less about producing images for publication and more about documenting skating that will help me to instigate a dialog with skateboarders, which leads to more subcultural contacts.

Skateboarding subculture

Despite the many theories of what a subculture is, where the boundaries exist and what their deviance means (Cloward and Ohlin, 1961; Cohen, 1955; Hall and

Jefferson, 1975) it is empirically clear that modern complex cities exhibit a wide range of subcultural diversity (Fischer, 1975). Less theoretically charged notions of subculture, define it simply as a group of people whose shared interests and beliefs, are somehow different from the 'mainstream' (Becker, 1963). Skateboarding is a subculture with its own distinct language, skill set, world view and set of values in which skaters self identify as members of an alternative subculture. While it is important to also note that subculture beliefs, practices, and values are not static (Fine and Kleinman, 1979) it is also the case that often what these groups share is a recognition that they are part of a subculture, and identify as such. Skaters, graffiti writers, goths (Hodkinson, 2002; Snyder, 2009) and others, self-identify as members of a subculture and define membership simply as those who are committed to the practice.

Skateboarding is not a homogeneous subculture and since its inception has attracted a diversity of practitioners. Skateboarders are united by the process and practice of skating and form their identities as skaters first and ethnic or racial identities second. The physical pounding and the male dominance of skating has made it generally unattractive to women. But there have been women professional skateboarders over the years who have made impressive contributions to the culture. Currently, Elissa Steamer and Marisa Del Santos are the top female pros (Kelly et al., 2005).

Skaters also come from a range of class experiences, from suburban upper middle class, to working class, to urban poor. While class is not a determining factor in nourishing skateboarding talent, it does require parents who are either extremely supportive, or in many cases, absent. However, it is true that the kids who can get access to technology (video recorders, computers, etc.) or can afford to go to skate camps like Camp Woodward, have a better chance of making a career documenting skateboarding.⁴

This group of people self-consciously constitute skateboarding subculture. They consider themselves to be part of skateboarding subculture and are involved and have contributed, on whatever scale, to the production and progression of skateboarding. They are distinct from those kids who simply own skateboards, and have chosen 'skater' as their outsider, identity, by dressing in skater fashions available at the local mall. Skating is something that cannot be faked, a skateboarder is not just someone who owns a skateboard, but one who has made a physical and mental commitment to learning skateboarding tricks, and has knowledge of the culture. Skateboarding is a diverse subculture that is based upon one thing only, the ability to skateboard.

Subculture media (Atton, 2002; Duncombe, 1997; Snyder, 2006) and the internet has made finding folks who share your practices, kinks, interests, obsessions or style, incredibly easy. What scholars have been slow to recognize however is that in the 21st-century subculture participation has become, for many people, not only a way to find people with whom to develop lasting relationships and ease the tensions of big city life (Fischer, 1975) but also presents potential career opportunities, sometimes where none existed.

For subcultures like skating the empirical reality is that, contrary to conventional wisdom, they have had a positive economic impact on the lives of many of its individual participants, by providing them with career opportunities. This is an idea that scholars have resisted for some time, in part because of the Birmingham School's (Hall and Jefferson, 1975) insistence that subcultures were symbolic manifestations of radical politics. The fact that people make careers out of their sub-cultural participation means that the radical promise that many had invested in stylistically resistant working-class subcultures has been dashed. And while some have decried subculturalists for selling out, this research shows that many people become involved in subcultures with the hope that they may be able to have a career doing what they love to do.

Subculture and the city

The role that skateboarding plays in attracting skaters to cities like Los Angeles, San Diego and San Francisco to participate in the skateboard industry and to skate the most famous spots, sheds light on some of the more classic theories of the role subcultures play in the city. In 'A Subculture Theory of Urbanism', Fischer (1975) dispelled Wirth's (1938) notion that increased 'urbanism' made cities scary, lonely places, with high levels of disorganization and individual anomie. Urban anomie theory, Fischer argued, was never supported by evidence. Urban ethnographers showed that in some form or another, community existed in many places and in vastly different forms and could be used to de-bunk the anomic myth of the city. Chicago School ethnographies (Becker, 1963; Whyte, 1947) showed that urbanites, even deviant ones, had lots of personal ties and felt connected to something larger than themselves.

Fischer argued instead that 'the more urban a place, the more intense its subcultures' (1975: 1320) He challenged the notion that large, metropolitan cities lead to atomization and increased levels of individual anomie, and showed that large populations produce diversity and this diversity results in greater numbers of subcultures with higher levels of subcultural intensity. Fischer and others (Becker, 1963; Berger, 1972; Fine and Kleinman, 1979) defined subcultures as those smaller cultural groups that exist within a larger cultural setting. Cities were a 'mosaic of subcultural worlds' which included not only deviant groups, but all groups that exhibit some sort of common interest and shared worldview, like youth cultures, professional organizations, and ethnic groups. This way of looking at subculture as an outgrowth of population increases, internal immigration, and folks shared specificity of interests, failed to generate much interest in post-1960s American sociology.

Even though many American urban sociologists have accepted Fischer's ideas as a counter to urban anomie, few have asked whether and how subcultures matter to cities beyond individual psychology. The influence of the Birmingham School essentially stopped the discussion surrounding subculture and cities that Fischer had begun. What impact do subcultures have on the makeup of a city and how

does their success and popularity attract others? Certainly sociologists and others know that New York City Latinos differ from those in LA; or that Detroit has a large Muslim population, and that Boston has the Irish. Each one of these groups is an essential component to their cities and contributes, culturally, politically and economically to the life of that city, and thus draws future generations of those groups to the city. And, just as it would be difficult to imagine New York City without Puerto Ricans, or Los Angeles without Mexicans, it would be equally difficult to imagine San Francisco without hippies, Seattle without grunge rockers, New York City without punk rock, hip hop or graffiti, and Los Angeles without skateboarding.

The subcultures that exist in a particular city matter in ways that are often neglected or ignored by politicians and scholars alike. Today when many young people think about their futures and where they want to live, the subcultures they identify with is often a key factor in drawing them to a particular place. One example of the way in which skateboarding draws talented people from different parts of the country to cities where the industry flourishes is the case of Atiba Jefferson and his twin brother Ako. Atiba and Ako grew up skateboarding in a section of Colorado Springs, Colorado called Acacia Springs.

In the late 1990s they loaded up a U-Haul and moved to San Diego. They arrived with no jobs but they knew skateboarders and skateboarding and thus looked to the subculture for survival. Ako used the graphic design skills he learned from making a 'zine to get a job assisting Tim Newhouse, the then art director at *Transworld Magazine*. Soon Atiba convinced skate photographer Grant Brittain to let him assist in the office. Now the twins had jobs and mentors. Not long after that, with his newfound access to film, Atiba started to get really good at photography, publishing more and more photos in the magazine, and soon became a staff photographer for *Transworld*. He rapidly became one of the most respected young photographers of his generation, and today is the photo editor for *The Skateboard Mag*.

Subcultural enclaves

One way to think about how subcultures attract talent and sustain a presence in American cities is to borrow from some of the work done in immigration studies by urban sociologist Roger Waldinger (1994). He has shown that the persistence and success of specific ethnic groups in the United States depends upon a groups' ability to develop an economic enclave or niche in a specific sector of the economy. This niche then creates opportunities for other co-ethnics. Opportunity for individual immigrants comes not from how quickly one can assimilate into the mainstream, but by how entrenched and cohesive one's particular ethnic group is in the urban economy. Waldinger (1995) calls these cohesive immigrant groups 'ethnic enclaves' and his studies of Irish firemen, Eastern European Jewish tailors, black health care workers, and Korean grocers, suggest that it is cultural retention, not individual assimilation that creates opportunity, and social mobility for immigrant populations.

Ethnic enclaves are a key factor contributing to upward social mobility of a particular group and explains why that group draws more and more people from the home country, creating not only strong personal ties, but also opportunity for more and more newcomers. Just as the ability to speak Korean and having connections in the produce industry are helpful for newly arriving immigrants in New York, the ability to skateboard and all of the requisite knowledge the subculture requires, is helpful for a newcomer to Los Angeles or San Diego. Subcultures like skateboarding create self-sustaining enclaves that attract more and more people to a city to capitalize on the opportunities that the subculture creates. While it's well known that Hollywood attracts talent to LA, skateboarders from around the world have moved to Los Angeles, and other California cities, to skateboard the famous spots and to hopefully participate in the industry. The subculture nurtures career opportunities and helps some individuals achieve economic self-sufficiency, and this means that despite all the negative attention that skating receives, it plays a significant factor in the California economy by drawing people to the state.

Skateboarding and the subculture career

Skaters resist attempts at spatial control by playing with and in public space (Borden, 2001). However, their creative use of space for their own purposes is not purely a critique of urban space; professional street skateboarders perform original tricks on subcultural landmarks for the purpose of progressing the discipline of skateboarding and getting paid. The quickest way for a young amateur to go pro and make a living at skating, is to 'land' and document a trick that has never been done on one of the standard spots known throughout the culture, like the 'Hollywood 16 stair' at Hollywood High in LA. Or as Jake Phelps of *Thrasher Magazine* writes, 'Lincoln [high school in San Francisco] has made some people quite rich.'⁵

Since subcultural activity has been interpreted as symbolic resistance for more than 30 years, the fact that folks make careers out of it is an issue that is often difficult for many theorists to accept (Hall and Jefferson, 1975; Hebdige, 1976). My research has shown that skateboarders participate in the subculture for fun but many also have the hope that they may make a living doing what they love to do.

This idea runs counter to the subculture theory of the Birmingham School (Hall and Jefferson, 1975) who argued that British working-class youth solved the problem of a consumption imperative by creating spectacular subcultural styles that tried to 'win space' from the larger society, by mocking, re-shaping, and resisting post-war capitalism's attempt to impose an identity upon them. These working-class youth became teddy boys, mods and punks by 'bricolaging' together a pastiche of styles, which shocked mainstream sensibilities, and amounted to an act of fleeting, symbolic, political resistance.

In the early 21st century, a new generation of UK scholars, many of whom had subcultural experiences (Hodkinson, 2002; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003), reassessed subcultural theory from a post-modern perspective. These 'post-

subculturalists' took many of the Birmingham tenets to task; specifically, the notion of class homogeneity and symbolic resistance. However, for all of the attention the post-subculturalists have devoted to re-assessing and dethroning the Birmingham project, their focus is almost exclusively on music subcultures that participants consume and build an identity around, with a requisite spectacular uniform. Subculture studies is still mostly about playing dress up, and researchers have for the most part neglected subcultures that don't revolve around a specific type of music. However, the most significant blind spot of current subculture research is that they fail to consider what impact subcultures have on youth as they become adults.

In *Resistance through Rituals*, Hall and Jefferson argue that subculture resistance is merely symbolic; it does not have actual effect on the lives of the participants because they cannot ever escape their class position. They write:

The problematic of a subordinate class experience can be 'lived through' negotiated or resisted; but it cannot be resolved at that level or by those means. There is no 'sub-cultural career' for the working class lad, no 'solution' in the subcultural milieu, for problems posed by the key structuring experiences of the class. (Hall and Jefferson, 1976: 47)

They argue that being a punk, while interesting for a time and resistant for a moment, is ultimately tragic because working-class youth will be forced back into the limited choices that their class position affords them. Hence, even though they had spectacular youths, their adult lives, will in all likelihood, be similar to their parents'; rife with occupational boredom and class exploitation.

Angela McRobbie (1975, 1989) often gets less credit than other Birmingham scholars, in part because she has consistently defended young peoples' attempts to make their own lives. Rather than claim an authentic political purity, she argues that subcultures have an 'entrepreneurial dynamic [that] has rarely been acknowledged' (Gelder and Thornton, 1997: 197). This was a fact that most of her colleagues in the Birmingham School denied or ignored because they were beholden to a political ideology in which any sort of commercialism was evidence of capitalist co-optation. McRobbie takes seriously young peoples' ambitions and desires for success '*on their own terms*', against those who want to judge young people for their complicity with capitalism and consumption (McRobbie, 2002, emphasis added).

It turned out that McRobbie was right about the lasting impact of subculture. The 'entrepreneurial infrastructure' in subcultures has in fact sustained them over the past 30 years and can be attributed in part as a reaction to the boring career choices many young people face (McRobbie, 1989; Thornton, 1994). Subculture researchers need to do a better job of considering how, and if, young people turn their subcultural experience into careers. While not every subculturalist achieves upward social mobility, it is equally narrow-minded to assume that those who do have material success should be deemed selfish, complicit, apolitical, or amoral.

The Birmingham scholars anticipated that this resistance would be short-lived and that the culture industry would market punk style as a commodity for mass consumption (Hebdige, 1979). Therefore, subcultural symbolism, in the service of corporate interests was no longer resistant and quickly led to the so-called 'death of punk' (Clark, 2003). Clark argues however, that this death also led to punk's rebirth, where new followers are in a constant dialogue with the forces of commodification. In this way, punks and other subculturalists, learn the ways of the enemy and practice their 'kung fu' (Prashad, 2001) in this context, constantly trying to outmaneuver their captors. Clark argues that the commodification of stylistically resistant punk, led to an actual politicization of punk whose consequent forms of resistance were no longer merely symbolic. As Clark writes, 'contemporary punk has forgone these performances of anarchy and is now almost synonymous with the practice of anarchism' (Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003: 233).⁶ Punk has evolved in places like Seattle, and elsewhere, into a powerful political force, leading the anti-globalization and culture jamming movements worldwide (Klein, 2000).

Certainly there are punks who have put on the costume, and for reasons that are complex and often personal, 'step and fetch' for money, just as there are those who don the dress, only to remove it at the first sign of trouble, that is, the need to get a 'real' job. But there are also punks committed for life, and whose lives are supported by a 'do-it-yourself' punk subculture career and their politics and ideologies continue to challenge the mainstream, even as they appear, stylistically, to be no longer resistant (Clark, 2003). Clark argues that the experience of witnessing the commodification of one's own culture politicized punks to the point where the spectacular was replaced by the actual.

Graffiti writers responded similarly to negative media campaigns by creating their own media, which in turn allowed them to find their own voice, as well as laying the entrepreneurial groundwork for subculture careers (Snyder, 2006, 2009). In skating there are those who dance to a corporate tune, and are sponsored by Mountain Dew, Red Bull, Axe Body Spray and the like, and there are also those who would never dream of riding for those companies. While the choices an individual pro skater makes about their own image and economic situation contributes to attitudes others might have about whether they are 'sell outs' or 'real' subculturalists, none of the above makes one any more or less a skateboarder, unless of course, they stop skating. For example, some skaters have decried the success, and the comments made by a 16-year-old Ryan Sheckler when he was the star of MTV's reality show *Life of Ryan*, as well as his sponsorship by Panasonic, Red Bull, and Axe Body Spray. However, one thing you can't say is that he's overrated as a skater. As most will tell you, and as I have witnessed first hand, the dude is gnarly, he is an unbelievably, talented skateboarder who takes incredible risks. This is to say that despite his commercial choices, his skating, which is to say his creative and insanely courageous feats in and on public spaces, remains in keeping with the dictates of skateboarding subculture.

While traditional social and political activism is for the most part missing from skateboarding culture, as more and more skaters experience criminalized spaces,

they have become active in discussions about the use of public space and in the building of skate plazas. Some like Billy Rohan and Steve Rodriguez, have long been engaged in activism and successfully won spaces for skaters to skate in New York City, an activity that some would say is rooted in politics.⁷ While the commercialization of skateboarding style, has not led to the type of activism that Clark recounts in punk subculture, the criminalization of skateboarding spaces, has in many ways forced skaters to become political, taking part in community meetings and becoming active in the discussion of how public space resources are used. Aaron Snyder most recently became active in the building of a skate plaza located on Stoner Avenue in West Los Angeles. The aptly named, Stoner Plaza was completed in the summer of 2010, and since that time Aaron has continued to attend community board meetings, acting as a liaison between the local civilian population and skaters.

The production of skateboard tricks

The skater

The existence of skateboarding subculture careers is itself a reflection of the DIY ethos that came out of the punk movement. Skaters find places to skate, document it and put the edited content in magazines, on DVDs and on the web, which they sell to other skateboarders.

For skateboarders the process of building a career starts when you begin to amass a portfolio of documented tricks, sometimes called 'clips' and sending them out. Skaters who have the goal of being sponsored document their tricks on video. They edit their tricks into what is called a 'sponsor me video', similar to a musician's 'demo tape', and send them to their favorite companies in the hope of getting 'flow', which is free product from a team. For young kids with talent, 'flow' is usually the first step and this occurs when skateboard company owners (who are skaters) offer promising young skaters free product to help them along with their development. The idea is that they will continue to skate and if they improve become sponsored amateurs or 'ams' as they are called. 'Ams' are officially on the team, get tricks in magazines, are given small parts in the videos, receive as much product as they need, and sometimes are given a small stipend (\$300–\$500/month). They are expected to represent the company at 'demos' (demonstrations) and contests, but mostly they are supposed to continue to produce skateboarding tricks, all with the hope, and in many cases the expectation, that their skating will progress to the point where the team will turn them pro, which means giving them a signature board from which they will receive royalties on the sales.

A professional skater has a signature board or 'deck' with their name on it and some graphic artwork that may have something to do with their personality and style.⁸ Pro skaters receive a percentage of board sales in addition to a monthly salary. Depending upon their status, and popularity, pros earn anywhere from \$5000 a month to \$40,000 a month and beyond. From a top tier board sponsor

other sponsorship follows. Most of the top pros also have a signature shoe, as well as, truck, wheel, clothing and hardware sponsors from whom they are also paid. Top pro's today make anywhere from \$100,000 a year, with a few making well over a \$1,000,000 a year. Aaron tells me that Chris Cole is rumored to make approximately \$40,000 a month. While, pro salaries are not usually a matter of public record, they are fairly easy to estimate based on a pro's status and number of sponsors. Most of the top companies provide their riders with health care and benefits, however some pros struggle to make a living skating. Billy Roper, for example, is a pro skater for a small company called Goldstar Skateboards and he supplements his income by being a stuntman in Hollywood productions.

Highly skilled skateboarders – the ones trying to get sponsored, the kids on flow, the ams and the pros – produce documented skateboarding tricks. For them, what it means to 'skate' is to perform tricks in public spaces on obstacles that meet specific requirements to contribute to what they call the 'progression of skateboarding'. This essentially means to understand what's been done before and to improve upon it. (Two terms reflect this: some tricks are 'ABD' or already been done, and some are 'NBD' or never been done.)

Similar to scholars who stand on the shoulders of giants, skateboarding tricks are done in the context of the subculture. Each obstacle, or skate spot has a history of tricks that have been completed on it and any new trick on it must be a piece of original, more challenging, research. For most pro skaters and up and coming ams, the tricks they film are ones that have never been done ('NBD') before. Consequently, skaters who do tricks that have previously been performed on certain obstacles will be ridiculed for un-originality and for not recognizing the 'ABD list' at certain spots.

Progression is achieved by doing tricks with greater degree of difficulty on existing skate spots, or by discovering new spots and performing 'legitimate' or difficult tricks on them. But skateboarders cannot achieve these feats alone, in order to contribute to this progression they need photographers and filmers to document their tricks. Skateboarding in its current form would not be possible without the documenters. Photographers and videographers are so important to subcultures like skating that it is important to look closely at how their role has shaped the history and production of skateboarding.

The photographer

The skateboard photographer has existed since the beginning of the skateboarding movement. Some of the early skate photographers like Craig Stecyk and Glen E. Friedman were surfers and skateboarders in West LA who hung out with the legendary Dogtown and Z-Boys.⁹ They documented the early history of modern skateboarding and wrote articles on the emergence of 'The Z-Boys' in *Skateboarder* magazine in the 1970s (Friedman and Stecyk, 2000).

However, skate photography is not simple documentation. To convey the difficulty and energy of a trick as well as the uniqueness of a spot, skateboard

photographers must understand skateboarding, and this knowledge comes from their experience as skaters. There are also technical skills required in order to properly light a spot, and to use the proper lens and shutter speed to capture a fast-moving skateboarder, and to know what the best angle is for a specific trick.

Skating as a fad began to fade in the late 1970s leaving only the hardcore, committed members of the subculture. Skating became less of a sport based upon contests and competition, and more of an all-consuming lifestyle in which 'progression' was documented on film and showcased in various subculture media outlets (Mullen and Mortimer, 2004). The first of these outlets were magazines. Fausto Vitello who owned Independent Trucks, started *Thrasher* magazine and hired some of the best photographers of the day (Brooke, 1999). *Thrasher* and *Transworld* have been the main outlets for skateboarding for more than 25 years and they have shaped the style and culture of skating (Phelps, 2006). Today the main skateboard magazines are *The Skateboard Mag*, *Thrasher*, *Transworld*, and *Skateboarding*, all of whom employ photographers and designers who are also skaters. These magazines are all located in California and attract the best talent from around the country and the world. The story of Atiba Jefferson, above, shows how skaters' personal histories are tied into the history and growth of the subculture.

The filmer

The history of skateboarding is the history of skateboard videos. This history is well known to all skaters, who can easily rattle off these videos and reference specific groundbreaking tricks at spots that are subcultural landmarks. Aaron explains this history to me in a series of emails, on Thursday afternoon 18 February 2010, and points out that this history doesn't exist without a competent 'filmer'.

The job of the skateboard filmer and the role of the skateboard video as the ultimate showcase of a company's riders were among the last elements of skateboarding culture to emerge. In fact, the current process of skate production with skaters, photographers and filmers has only been codified for approximately the last 15–20 years. In the early days those who did try to capture skateboarding on film used 8 mm, sometimes even 16 mm movie cameras. However, around this time video cameras began to replace film as the medium for documenting skateboarding. These consumer VHS cameras, which became a staple of middle-class homes, were easy to use and didn't require sophisticated lighting and developing. Kids encouraged their parents to let them use the family camera and within a few weeks the 10-year-old became the family video expert (as was the case in our family). While not every kid's family had a VHS camera, someone in the crew always did, and kids took turns filming each other's tricks.

In 1988, H Street Skateboards (started by pro skater Tony Magnusson, who today owns Osiris Skateboard shoes), featured such stars as Matt Hensley, Rick

Howard, Sal Barbier and a young Mike Carroll and Danny Way. H Street's 1988 video 'Shackle Me Not' was the first skateboard video to be shot entirely on video tape. While this video did not have the aesthetic qualities of film, it was a document of each rider's skating that could be disseminated to the entire subculture, which encouraged other skaters to do the same. From then on skaters were documenting their tricks and amassing video footage to edit into a 'part'.

H Street followed up 'Shackle Me Not' with 'Hocus Pocus' but it was also in 1993 when some skaters started *411 Video Magazine*. These hour-plus long videos came out every other month and showcased riders from all over the country. This created a need for tons of footage and they encouraged skaters to send in the footage that they had shot. If it got used in the video, they would be paid. Soon the skateboard video began to dominate the culture. Each year board companies would put out videos, which became integral in establishing their reputation and popularity. After the H Street videos, Blind Skateboards put out an amazing video called *Video Days*, which featured Mark Gonzales and Jason Lee. The video was shot and edited by Spike Jonze, who went on to become an Oscar-nominated Hollywood film director.

Skateboard filming requires a very special combination of artistic and athletic skills. The filmer must be able to compose shots while riding a skateboard next to a performing skater. They must be good enough skaters to keep up with the pros, and in some cases, come to a screeching stop right on the precipice of a set of stairs, all the while avoiding the skater's space and keeping the shot framed up. Filmers also are required to have a vast knowledge of tricks so as to know what angles are best for certain tricks, and to make sure skaters don't do tricks that have already been done. Of course, there are also technical aspects involved that require knowledge of lighting, shutter speed, etc. While there are many skaters who become filmmakers only the best, like RB Umali, Ty Evans, Greg Hunt and a few others, actually make good livings at it, although film and digital video skills can easily be used to make careers in other industries, like film, television or providing web content.

RB Umali: Filmer

By the mid-90s therefore one could go pro as a skater, a photographer or a filmer. RB Umali, a Filipino-American who began skating in Houston, Texas in the early 1990s was a sponsored amateur for a company called Screw Skateboards. However, as high school began to draw to a close his parents, both actuarial scientists, convinced him to apply to college. For RB the idea that he could continue to skateboard and be creative without having to constantly risk injury was becoming appealing. He used his skate videos (and excellent SAT scores) to get accepted at NYU film school and the move to New York proved to be one of the best of his life. Today RB is a very successful skateboard filmmaker with five highly respected skateboard films to his credit. He now earns a yearly salary from both Zoo York Skateboards and Red Bull to film their skateboarders.

The skateboard team

In addition to all of the folks involved in magazine and video production there are also numerous careers in the skateboarding industry that have to do with the designing, administering and selling of skateboards and skateboarding related products. On the commodity side of skateboarding there are board companies, shoe companies, clothing companies, watch companies, sunglass companies, truck companies, wheel companies, grip tape companies and hardware companies. Of these, boards and shoes are the most lucrative. In the past 10 years skate shoe companies have begun to compete with the major brands, and since skate shoes are also sold as 'lifestyle' sneakers, they make a lot of money, a fact not lost on Nike and Converse, who now sponsor skateboard teams.

The process of company ownership is an important model to understand for the subculture career. Beginning in the mid-1980s skateboarders got frustrated with the big companies (Powell/Perralta, Santa Cruz, Tracker, Independent and Vision) that ruled skateboarding and began to find ways to take ownership of skateboarding (Mullen and Mortimer, 2004). One of the first to go this route was a former pro freestyle skater, Steve Rocco, who convinced fellow pro-skaters Rodney Mullen, and Mike Vallely to invest their money to help him start World Industries. Rocco began his company in 1987 and made an active push to chip away at the domination of the big five in the marketplace. He did this by enticing the best skaters to join his company, and paying them \$2.00 per board sold, rather than the industry standard \$1.00 (Mullen and Mortimer, 2004). World Industries eventually became extremely successful and spawned other skater owned companies, like Blind, Foundation, and Plan B (Brooke, 1999).

While some companies are owned by corporations and sell skateboards in the toy section at Wal-Mart, the most successful and influential skateboarding companies today are all owned by professional skateboarders. For example, Jamie Thomas owns Zero, Mystery and Slave Skateboards; Rick Howard, Mike Carroll and Spike Jonze own Girl Skateboards and Chocolate Skateboards; Andrew Reynolds owns Baker Skateboards, and Ed Templeton owns Toy Machine. These skaters also own shoe companies, clothing companies, truck companies, and in some cases distribution companies (www.blackboxdistribution.com).

One of the most successful skate company owners is current pro Jamie Thomas. Thomas was a top pro for Ed Templeton's company Toy Machine in the 1990s and later went on to start his own company. Today Jamie owns Black Box distribution, which includes Zero Skate boards, Mystery Skateboards, Slave Skateboards and Fallen Footwear. Black Box Distribution has 160 employees and a 120,000-square-foot warehouse in Carlsbad, California. The company has grown 200 percent during the past seven years, and in 2006 he was awarded Ernst & Young's entrepreneur of the year for San Diego County (Higgins, 2006).

Skateboarders retain ownership in their companies' distribution and media, and in doing so, they create opportunities for themselves in the form of subculture careers and for future skaters by providing a subcultural enclave for skaters to

flock to. This subcultural activity constitutes so much more than simply riding a skateboard, illegally on a city street. Professional street skateboarders are engaged in the process of producing content (tricks) for the various subculture media outlets, which provides opportunities not only for skaters who are talented enough to accept the challenge of progression but also for many young people who flock to California in the hopes of making a career out of something they love, skateboarding. This subculture has provided California with a ton of talented people who have impacted the state culturally, economically and even politically, at least on the local level. While an economic impact study is beyond the scope of this study, it is clear that skateboarding is significant in ways that are rarely considered.

The vulnerable careerists

Yet despite all of these efforts the subculture career should not be seen as a solution to any of the real problems that young people face. Subculture careers tend to be in fields where people make and produce careers in which there is often no healthcare and very little job security. These are vulnerable careers in which many people work freelance as independent contractors, and yet in many ways these are the careers folks actually want.

Since the 1950s commentators on economic life have focused attention not only on the alienation of the laborer, but also on the alienation, despair and dissatisfaction of managers as well. Mill's 'white collar men' led lives of quiet desperation, in which their own individual wills, imaginations and intellects were subsumed by bureaucracies and the ethos of the group. In *The Power Elite*, he expanded his critique to include corporate executives, offering a scathing account of the type of conformity necessary for executive success. He writes:

Be the tolerant Maybe-man and they will cluster around you, filled with hopefulness. Practice softening the facts into the optimistic, practical, forward-looking, cordial, brink view. Speak to the well-blunted point. Have weight; be stable: caricature what you are supposed to be but never become aware of it much less amused by it. And never let your brains show. (Mills, 1956: 143)

Many young people today seek careers where they can utilize aspects of themselves, which facilitate some affirmation of their identities, an identity that they may have cultivated through youth subculture participation. In part, this is because the dream of a company job, with good healthcare, stability and a clearly defined corporate ladder to climb, has in many ways vanished (McRobbie, 2002). More and more the rewards for going mainstream just aren't what they used to be, and as a result, subculture participation, and the promise of working in a competitive field you enjoy, becomes a way of finding oneself and likeminded others. This tends to be the case in music (Hodkinson, 2002), fashion (McRobbie, 2002), graffiti (Snyder, 2009) and skateboarding. These careers are highly competitive and draw many people from all over the world, and while many fail, the ones who succeed inspire others to keep trying.

In most cases the training for subcultural careers comes from a series of mentoring relationships, and 'do it yourself' motivation that occurs entirely within the subculture. But even for those who don't succeed, the training provided by the subculture can often be utilized in other industries. This is clearly the case with skateboarding. Because skating relies so much on documentation, skaters are incredibly familiar filming and being filmed, and in many cases this experience can be transitioned into other industries. Many skaters are able to work in film and television production as actors, camera operators, editors, stuntmen and even directors.

But careers in subcultures that foster creativity might not be all that they're cracked up to be. McRobbie (2002) argues that these careers, while offering fulfillment, also make young people more individualized and de-politicized and thus, more vulnerable to the cruelties of capitalism. McRobbie's study of what she calls the 'cultural sector' of the UK economy, which includes fashion, film and other creative careers, shows that the turn toward creative cultural work has undergone a process of individualization where young people seek jobs they hope will be fulfilling, contribute to their sense of self, and 'pre-empt the conscription into 9-5 dullness' (McRobbie, 2002: 521). McRobbie believes however that young people are paying a significant price for this fulfillment. She argues that the transition away from a workplace of class solidarity, and towards a self-fulfilling and ultimately self-exploiting individual creative career, makes young people more vulnerable to the brutalities of capitalism. This is the case with many in the skateboard industry, who work as independent contractors and receive no health benefits, and skate with the knowledge that one injury could mean a mountain of debt. Only a small percentage of pro skaters make enough money to retire off of so many spend their 30s trying to figuring out how to remain part of skating subculture even after they're done skating.

Subculture enclaves, subculture careers

Skateboarding subculture sustains itself and progresses through the documentation of skateboard tricks disseminated through subculture media like magazines and videos. This production process creates opportunities for skaters beyond just professional skateboarding, in photography, video, editing, art direction, graphic design and business ownership. These skater-owned companies create opportunities for other subculture participants and as a result draw talented people from all over the world to places like Los Angeles to participate in the skateboard industry.

The subculture career and the resulting subcultural enclaves should not be read as solutions to the social, political and economic problems facing young people in the city. Nor should it be an excuse for politicians and planners to invest solely in skate parks and music venues (Florida, 2003), the so-called 'soft infrastructure' (Peck, 2004), at the expense of real investment in the health and education of young people. It is rather my intention to showcase skateboarding subculture and the lives that people make from it, in an effort towards countering commonly held negative

perceptions of skateboarders' relationship to the city. Their courageous and imaginative use of space leads to the creation of opportunities for young people, which means that skateboarding has created an entirely new use of urban spaces, which provide not only a space to play but also a chance for economic sustenance.

Notes

1. Mr Brainwash is a known 'street artist' whose work is documented in the film, *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, directed by Banksy in 2010.
2. The first two trips were made possible with grants from the PSC-CUNY Research Foundation. The third trip was financed by the Eugene Lang Junior Scholar's Fund, the fourth trip and ongoing research is funded by the Whiting Fellowship.
3. On research with family members, see Rambo-Ronai (1996).
4. Camp Woodward is also a reality television show on *Fuel TV*.
5. On the relationship between urban spaces and consumption practices, see Hayward (2004).
6. For more on the relationship of symbols to political activism, see Ferrell (2007).
7. This comes from a discussion with Billy Rohan on the corner of Broadway and 17th street in New York City, September 2010.
8. Skateboard art has been featured in galleries, book and film. The California Heritage Museum is currently showing 'The Evolution of Skateboard Art'.
9. See also the award-winning documentary film *Dogtown and Z-Boys* (2001), directed by Stacy Peralta

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