

Introduction

I got my first and only skateboard, a used Alva, in 1980, the summer between 6th and 7th grade. This was the summer when Peter Hoeffel introduced my middle brother Brian, and me, to The Sex Pistols, Devo and The Clash. Peter was also a skater and he made it clear that in order to be “punk” we had to build a skateboard ramp in our backyard, so we too could become skate punks. At the time there was no such thing as street skating, and no skate parks in our hometown, Green Bay, Wisconsin, so building a ramp was our only option.

We were young and dumb and we built our ramp with no help from adults or anyone who had ever built a ramp before, but we were very excited when we finally finished it. That is until Peter took the first run, and shouted out, “it suuuuucks” and we discovered immediately how poorly designed our ramp was. (For skate nerds: It sucked because we had 10ft. on the deck side, 12ft. on the other, with 4 feet of vert, and only 8 feet of flat. Oops.)

Soon the summer was over and I started junior high and the ramp sat there un-used until Brian and Peter dismantled the ramp and turned it into a quarter pipe for their BMX bikes. They got really good on their bikes and our skateboards collected dust in the garage. My skating officially came to a close when I left my board in the path of my Mom’s car and she ran over it, snapping it in two.

My youngest brother, Aaron, was between 3 and 5 years old during this time and although he never got to skateboard on the ramp, he says that it had a big impact on him when skateboarding began to increase in popularity in the late 80s with the advent of street skateboarding.

While my interest in skating waned rather quickly, Aaron soon became obsessed. Aaron began skating when he was 9 years old, just around the time I left for college, and soon thereafter announced that skating was what he would do with his life. He began skateboarding in Green Bay and kept at it when my family moved to Madison, Wisconsin in 1988. In 1995 when he was 18 years old, he moved to San Diego, California to try and become a professional skateboarder.

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Aaron Snyder with his Christmas Gift. Photo: Maureen Snyder.

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Aaron Snyder, Judo air, age 12. Photo: Maureen Snyder.

In 2001 he turned pro for Darkstar Skateboards but by 2004 he was no longer a sponsored professional. Aaron moved to Los Angeles and continued to skate, but he was having a difficult time growing up and out of skateboarding. By 2008, at the beginning of this project, Aaron was very much an outsider in skating, the very thing he loved the most. Looking back, I remember vividly a moment in 2009 when Aaron, on the verge of tears, pulled the car over, so he could vent and express his frustration and the depression that accompanied no longer being a part of skating.

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Aaron Snyder, backside tail slide, to fakie. Photo: Kimathi Smith.

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Aaron Snyder's Pro Board. Photo: A. Snyder.

It took some time but today much of this has changed, and I can't help but feel like working on this project helped to make a difference. Aaron has become something else, and yet, mostly he's still just a skater. He is still searching for his ideal career, but he works as freelance video editor for reality television as well as skate related content. He has found a crew of skaters in West Los Angeles that provide inspiration and camaraderie, and he is well respected both for his skills and his knowledge of the culture. In 2010 he was hired as a judge for the Street League Skateboarding competition, which allowed him to develop relationships with some of the best skateboarders in the world, and I was included.

He has also surprisingly become an activist and was part of the team that successfully lobbied local LA politicians to unlock his favorite skate spot in the world, The Courthouse in West Los Angeles, which I will have a lot to say about later in the book. He then has become the de-facto liaison between the council members and the skaters. He's organized clean ups, developed a relationship with the Chair of the West LA Neighborhood Council, and even worked briefly with Nike executives to back future renovations to The Courthouse. He is also working on his own short documentary about skateboard activism and the attempt to "free" public skate spots.

Professional Street Skateboarding

This book is about professional street skateboarding, not recreational skateboarding as a mode of resistance or ritual, but as a highly refined, athletic and aesthetic pursuit, from which a large

number of people profit. (Skateboarding has been estimated to be a \$5 Billion dollar a year industry.)¹ Street skateboarders see the world differently, because they are skating on it, and to do so they creatively interpret architectural features —ledges, banks, gaps, stairs and handrails— in order to to perform their tricks. The tricks they perform are filmed and photographed and then disseminated to numerous platforms—videos, magazines, social media, websites. Skaters do this to increase their reputations, and hence their earnings by documenting their tricks. This model is similar in some ways to the academy where professors publish original research articles (tricks) in the most prestigious journals (magazines) and from these published feats, money and other rewards follow.

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Skateable stairs, SAMO 14, Santa Monica High School, Santa Monica, CA. Photo: G. Snyder.

The careers of skateboarders has been advanced by their own media efforts in which skaters document and disseminate skateboarding feats to a global audience of consumers and producers of skateboarding content, i.e., tricks performed on street obstacles. As a result, there are numerous support careers within the skateboarding industry, which come from the need to document, disseminate, design and distribute skateboarding content and skateboarding products. This means that what I refer to as the “skateboarding subculture” supports the career aims of not only highly talented skateboarders, but also, “filmmers”, photographers, video editors, writers, journalists, shoe designers, clothing designers, graphic artists, team managers, web designers, and company owners, to name just a few. Importantly, all of the participants in this industry have one thing in common, they are skaters. (Except of course for the major athletic apparel

corporations, like Nike, Adidas, Converse, and New Balance whose “action sports directors”, I have found, are usually not skaters.)

Despite this professionalism and worldwide popularity, skateboarding in much of the United States is illegal. Skaters are enmeshed in a constant battle with security guards and police to skate on public spaces. The result is that they are always getting kicked out of spots and constantly have to be on the lookout for police. But for the most part the consequences of illegality are merely a nuisance, skaters are often ticketed, and forced to pay a nominal fine (which pro skaters can easily afford), but they are usually not arrested or given jail time, they are simply forced to leave. But they always come back.

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No Skateboarding, Los Angeles, CA. Photo: G. Snyder.

It is tempting to interpret skateboarding in and on public space as small acts of spatial transformation with potential political resistance, as sociologist Francisco Vivoni and architecture historian Iain Borden have done superbly.² However, I will show that the politics of professional skateboarding come less from the types of activities that skaters engage in and more from the camaraderie that comes from sharing a passion with like-minded others. Skaters are constantly getting kicked out of spots and being reminded that skating is illegal and that they are a public nuisance. But skaters’ persistent transformation of spots, while not directly political, informs their interpretation of public space. This has created strong bonds of social cohesion among skaters and these bonds, combined with a deft use of social media, have translated into

small but significant collective actions.³ This is to say that the politics of many subcultures lie not in spectacular acts of symbolic resistance but in the way subcultural solidarity fosters a community.⁴

In my previous research on graffiti writers in New York City, the idea of what I called a “subculture career” emerged out of my protracted study. As the graffiti writers aged, they found ways to turn their skills and connections within their subculture into careers. This is not the case with my research on skateboarding, which has had a fully formed, and ever-expanding, subculture industry for more than two decades. What emerged from my research on skateboarding is that a large number of skaters have subculture careers, and as they have gained economic, and social power, they have begun to translate this into political power, especially in issues related to their use of public space. The politics of subculture, therefore, lie not in the content of subcultural activity manifesting as abstract resistance, but in the community that accrues from social interaction with people with whom you share a worldview. This means that the politics of skateboarding, and subcultures in general, is less about the form of activity and more about the community and solidarity that comes from participating in the subculture.

An additional lesson of this study, and one that skaters have been trying to convince me of for a long time, is that skateboarders believe they can do anything. I first heard photographer Giovanni Reda proclaim, “skateboarders can change the world,” at a contest he was hosting which also raised money for a sick kid. Nowadays, Reda who produced and directed the 2016 video with over 667,000 views on YouTube, in which Brian Anderson comes out as a gay man, signs all of his Instagram posts with the hashtag #skatersruletheworld⁵. They believe that they can change the world, or at least, how the world views skateboarding. For a long time, I resisted this

notion, dismissing it as simple bluster, but having spent time with them, I'm starting to believe it.⁶

Subculture and Self-Preservation

The Contemporary Centre for Cultural Studies, in England, which later came to be known as the Birmingham School, gained prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s under the direction of Stuart Hall. With an energetic crew of young graduate students including Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, Dick Hebdige, and Brian Roberts, the CCCS began to focus their critical gaze towards elements of pop and working class culture, and specifically the spectacular styles of working class youth cultures. These scholars emphasized that it was important for investigators of culture to focus not only on so called "high culture" but also on youth, pop, and working class cultures. Their initial interest was piqued by the so-called Teddy Boys whose dress was a riff on the "Edwardian" suits of the period, marketed towards the upper class. The teddy boys put together a look that shocked mainstream sensibilities, and most closely resembled what today we would call rockabilly culture. The Teds spawned other groups, like the Mods (think The Who, with crisp suits, skinny ties, amphetamines and tricked out Vespas), the Rockers, who wore leather jackets and were inspired by early Elvis Presley, culminating most importantly with the Punks, who wore ripped clothes safety pinned together, with spiked and dyed hair, all the while snarling a giant 'fuck off' to everything that England held sacred, like the Beatles, and most famously in the case of the Sex Pistols, the Queen.

Birmingham School cultural studies used a theoretical model which led them to interpret working class youths' style, as an act of symbolic resistance which momentarily, hoped to "win space" from the larger society. Subculturalists did this, these scholars argued, by mocking, re-