

there is no reason to go to an unfamiliar area, unless that space has a special quality of architectural happenstance that appeals to you.

Skaters today, like graffiti writers in New York City generations ago, actively cross urban boundaries in search of spots and in doing so understand their city in an entirely different way from the maps constructed by urban sociologists in the 1920s. In this sense skaters are postmodern explorers of the contemporary city unbound by country or continent or hemisphere. Skaters are citizens of city earth, constantly exploring, searching for new undiscovered places to expand their discipline's notions of what's possible, all the while developing an ever more intimate relationship with the urban geography of the world's built environment. And yet, those serendipitous public spaces that are cherished by skateboarders, like Embarcadero, Love Park, and the West LA Courthouse, became physical focal points not only where skaters had access to architecture that suited their needs, but also where they had each other, to hang out, to talk, and most importantly to learn and progress.

### Skateboarding Subculture

Subculture should be understood simply as a smaller cultural group that exists within the culture of a larger society. This inclusive definition of subculture, which does not assume members to be working-class or deviant follows the one offered by sociologist Claude Fischer in 1975, but the idea of understanding subcultures as groups with shared interests has since been mostly forgotten.<sup>35</sup> There are ethnic, occupational, leisure, sport, and music subcultures, and many, many more. Subcultures are not by definition resistant or subversive, though that is the definition most commonly accepted by many scholars and journalists, but stamp collectors and Wall Street traders constitute a subculture just as much as outlaw bikers, gangsters, and graffiti writers. In fact more and more the "mainstream" increasingly includes a diversity of subcultures, some of which are valued, others not. As Fischer writes, "Cities provide the critical mass necessary for a viable subculture and the clashes that accentuate that culture. With size comes 'community'—even if it is a community of thieves, counterculture experimenters, avant-garde intellectuals, or other unconventional persons."<sup>36</sup>

Skateboarding is a subculture because its members define it as such. Like all subcultures it has its own distinct language, skill set, worldview, and set of values. While it is important to note that subculture beliefs, practices, and values are not static, it is also the case that often what these groups share is a recognition that they are self-consciously part of a subculture, and identify as such.<sup>37</sup> Skaters, graffiti writers, goths, and others self-identify as members of a subculture and define membership simply as those who are committed to the practice.<sup>38</sup>

### *Who Skates?*

Skateboarding has attracted a diversity of practitioners since its inception. Skateboarders are united by the process and practice of skating and form their skater identities first and their ethnic or racial identities second. When it comes to race many people incorrectly assume that graffiti writers are black and skaters are white; my experience is mostly the opposite. Most of the graffiti writers I met were white, whereas a majority of my contacts in skateboarding were people of color. During my time researching skating there were no pro skaters who were openly gay. Until. . . .

September 27, 2016, I arrive for my last research trip to LA. Aaron and I are catching up, and while scrolling through my feeds I notice that folks are posting stuff about legendary skater Brian Anderson. “BA” as he is also known has played many groundbreaking roles and won skater of the year from *Thrasher* magazine in 1999. In recent years, he has been less of an active pro and has done sneaker designs for Nike (the BA Project) and owned a short-lived board company.

We figure out all the attention has something to do with Vice Sports, and a quick search reveals the title “Brian Anderson on Being a Gay Professional Skateboarder.” We are stunned and thrilled. The fact that Brian Anderson is so many people’s favorite skater means that even the most homophobic skaters will have to reassess their notions. But it’s not even an issue; the culture has rejoiced, calling it a “big day in skateboarding history.” There has been nothing but positivity and support for Brian Anderson and Giovanni Reda, who conducted the interview and filmed most of it. The next day *Rolling Stone* picks up the story, followed a day later by the *New York Times*.<sup>39</sup>

I will say, however, that all of my skating contacts are male, though I did encounter some female skaters at Stoner Plaza. There are professional female skateboarders who have made impressive contributions to the culture. The first great female pro street skater was Elissa Steamer, who inspired the current generation of female pros, which includes Lacey Baker, Alexis Sablone, and Leticia Bufoni.<sup>40</sup> However, despite repeated attempts, I was unable to develop anything more than a cursory relationship with female skaters.<sup>41</sup> This is in part because I did not want to simply reach out to female skaters solely because of their gender, and this is likely the same reason that female skaters tend to be suspicious of male researchers.<sup>42</sup> Although she did not participate directly in this project, former pro skater Jaime Reyes is a close friend whose career I followed closely when she rode for Rookie Skateboards—an all-female team—during the late 1990s and early 2000s, and her response to being a “female skater” was that she’s just a skater. There are certainly fewer financial opportunities for female skaters, and those who do receive opportunities tend to also be judged by their appearance. But this is changing; there are two female-owned skate companies and a foundation, and for the past two years women have competed in the Street League Super Crown Finals.

Skateboards are not very expensive (especially compared to snowboards, BMX bikes, and motorcycles), which means that skaters come from a range of class backgrounds, from the suburban upper-middle class to the working class and 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 within the skateboarding industry.<sup>43</sup>

This group of people self-consciously constitutes skateboarding subculture. They 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 identity by dressing in skater fashions available at the local mall. Skating is something that cannot be faked; therefore a skater is not just someone who rides a skateboard, but one who has made a physical and

mental commitment to learn skateboarding tricks and has knowledge of the culture.<sup>44</sup> Street skateboarding as I'm using it here is a diverse subculture that is based upon one thing only—the ability to perform tricks on a skateboard.

Subculture media and the Internet have made finding folks who share your practices, kinks, interests, obsessions, and style incredibly easy.<sup>45</sup> What scholars have been slow to recognize however is that in the 21st century subculture participation has become, for many people, more than a way to find people with whom to develop lasting relationships and ease the tensions of big city life, as Fischer described; as a subculture reaches “critical mass,” it presents potential career opportunities, sometimes where none previously existed.<sup>46</sup>

For subcultures like skating, the reality is that, contrary to conventional wisdom, they have had a positive economic impact on the lives of many participants by providing them with career opportunities. As discussed earlier this is an idea that scholars have resisted for some time, in part because of the Birmingham School's insistence that subcultures are symbolic manifestations of radical politics.<sup>47</sup> Recently, Australian scholar Kara-Jane Lombard has been one of the few to understand the futility of the Birmingham School for understanding how contemporary skateboarders see their subculture. She writes, “Skateboarding has a complex relationship with commercial culture . . . at the same time there has been resistance to some instances of commercial incorporation. . . . Thus purely oppositional or resistive readings of skateboarding are problematic.”<sup>48</sup>

The fact that people make careers out of their subcultural 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, 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.<sup>49</sup>

Although skateboarding subculture exhibits very little stratification along the classic lines of race, ethnicity, class, or even age, this is not to say that skating has been completely exempt from the racism and classism that exists in the larger society. Jeremy Nemeth argues that at Philadelphia's iconic Love Park in the 1990s there was some tension between white and black skaters.<sup>50</sup> Nemeth suggests that Stevie Williams, who is