

Female Skateboarders and their Negotiation of
Space and Identity

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ABSTRACT

Female Skateboarders and their Negotiation of Space and Identity

Natalie Porter

I have considered how female skateboarders negotiate space and identity in a male-dominated subculture and question a society that is intent on perpetuating an attitude that subcultures are a domain for developing masculinity. Female skateboarders have always participated alongside the men, but it has been a constant struggle because their accomplishments are rarely encouraged by the skateboard media industry, and mainstream media representations reflect this practice. In recent years, girl skaters have taken it upon themselves to create their own visibility and develop networks of support by producing websites, videos, zines, and organizing “all-girls” skateboard competitions. As a result, a unique community of female skateboarders has been established.

Female skateboarders come from a variety of backgrounds, and I focus upon the experiences of a group of women skateboarders from Montréal, Canada by conducting interviews and observing how the group has evolved. Despite the diverse and even contradictory responses, it is apparent that when female skateboarders actively participate in the subculture they are redefining traditional notions of femininity and assumptions regarding who should be valued as an “authentic” skateboarder. My thesis traces a history of women in skateboarding, describes their activities as cultural producers, and offers insider accounts, such as acts of resistance. I also make comparisons with the situation of sportswomen and challenge past subcultural research that limit the participation of girls to their relationships with male members. It was my goal to exhibit how women can adopt, share and innovate their subcultures’ ideals.

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* These photos were taken by Erika Dubé

Introduction

For most Montréal residents “Berri” is known as the downtown location where three metro lines and a bus station converge. For skateboarders it is known for its wide-open plaza, with a long marble ledge, and inclined banks, ideal for practicing various skateboard tricks. Berri Square has been *the* meeting place as of the summer 2002, ever since “Peace Park,” a popular skateboard spot on St. Laurent Street near Chinatown was considered a bust. Police were circulating the area daily, liberally distributing fines to skateboarders, removing the local homeless in an attempt to “clean up” the neighborhood, and preparing for the plans to build student residences. As a result, skateboarders adopted Berri as their hang-out, with minimal harassment from the Police in comparison to Peace Park. Above the square there is a grassy hill where people relax and observe our activities, everyone from young hippies playing hackey-sack, and office workers on their lunch break to unemployed people scrounging for empty bottles to return for change. I was recently approached by a woman in her mid-thirties on her way home from work downtown, who was ecstatic to see me, a young woman out skateboarding in the streets, and encouraged me to continue. I smiled and waved in appreciation, and then returned to the trick that I was practicing. I have had such encounters before and enjoy them, especially when a young girl might stop to watch me, and I wonder if, after seeing me she might convince her parents to buy her a skateboard. Other times, my interactions with the public are not as pleasant. I have been heckled by drivers, mocked by young men who demand to see me perform a basic skate trick, and reprimanded by elderly persons who consider my activities offensive and inappropriate for a young woman. Even well-

meaning people can be frustrating, as they stop me in the street to exclaim that I am the first girl they have ever seen on a skateboard, and demand to know my opinions on why there are not more and how I feel as a rarity. To respond to such questions is no easy task, and sometimes I have even felt burdened by them and resentful. Perhaps, to get a better understanding of these issues and my own opinions, and in retaliation to some of the negative attitudes that have been directed towards me, I have made female skateboarders the focus of my thesis. By writing about my experiences and those of my peers, I would like to believe that I will offer an alternative view regarding the position, representation and opinions of females within male-dominated subcultures, and how they negotiate space and identity within our postmodern society.

I began skateboarding in 1995 as an activity to do during the “off season” of snowboarding, considering that the two activities and lifestyles tend to complement each other. Initially, I would skateboard along a smooth road towards my workplace, and practice basic tricks like “ollies” and “shuvits” (see glossary for definitions) in an empty parking-lot or in the privacy of my carpeted basement before venturing out to the popular skateboard spots downtown. I was soon hooked, and instead of longing for snow-covered mountains, I preferred the hard surface of concrete and the heat of summer. I was fortunate to know a lot of guys who did both snowboarding and skateboarding, including my elder brother, as well as a girl from my highschool. I participated in local competitions and whenever I met another female skateboarder it was very exciting, as though we had an immediate bond that often did not have to be verbalized. For example, in 1999 I studied for a semester in Prague, Czech Republic where I met two Czech girl

skaters, and despite the language barrier, we would meet each day at the Stravanice skate park or at the Stalin monument and encourage each other through our gestures.

It was when I moved to Vancouver, which is considered the skateboard mecca of Canada due to its abundance of free concrete skateboard parks and more temperate weather, that I became part of a group of approximately ten skateboarding girls, known as the Black Angels. Their energy, creativity, and passion for skateboarding were impressive and inspiring! In 1998, it was announced that the annual “Slam City Jam” North American Skateboard Championship was offering a girls’ category and we were all enthusiastic about the prospect of skating the impressive course of obstacles and being part of the event. That first year, in an effort to encourage girls to compete in front of thousands of spectators, the entrance fee was less expensive than if we were to buy a three-day pass, so my friends and I went for it. While the guys were expected to compete alone, the girls mutually decided that they would be more comfortable in a jam format with three sections of five girls skating, while being judged simultaneously. The atmosphere was very celebratory despite being slotted as the first event early on Sunday morning, and we vowed to do it again. The following year, thirty-five girls entered, and in 2000 there was so much enthusiasm, that the organizers had to limit the number of participants to those who were sponsored by a company, as well as increase the entrance fee. Since then, the format of the girls’ competition has been identical to the guys, and their performance is a highly anticipated part of the competition, instead of a sideshow. The level of skill exhibited by these girls is rapidly improving, beyond that of the average male skateboarder. Many of the girls are in their early teens, proving that the future for women in skateboarding is strong.

That first year of competition was special considering that our idol, professional skateboarder, Elissa Steamer from Florida competed as well. Also from the U.S. was a set of twins named Tiffany and Nicole Morgan from San Diego who were making a zine called *Villa Villa Cola* that included stories about themselves and their friends who skateboard, along with humorous drawings, and photos. The zine was very popular, and they eventually made a video, a website, and clothing. In following years, when the competition became more intense, female skateboarders arrived from Australia and Brazil. The Brazilian girls also had a zine called *Check it Out Girls*, which was a more professional design. Our network of friends was growing internationally, and I was motivated to travel again, visiting countries across Europe, entering competitions and meeting more female skateboarders from the United Kingdom, France and Switzerland.

There were times when I was treated as a novelty act and felt alienated, being the sole female skateboarding at a park or in the city streets. In the Czech Republic I attended a skateboard camp as the only girl. To entertain the “campers” at night, who were aged fourteen and up, strippers performed on a stage and alcohol was heavily consumed. My male friends insisted that this type of entertainment was a common cultural practice in the Czech Republic, but I was hardly comforted. I would like to believe that my presence in this environment, as a female who did not exist to be servile or seductive for their benefit, but rather, was an opinionated woman who could skateboard with the best of them, had some impact. Another instance, in my current location of Montréal, was also frustrating. I went to see the premiere of a skateboard video, where the organizers had rented out a porn movie theatre for the screening. Usually, video premieres are exciting events where skateboarders get together to

celebrate the completion of their video. But, due to the location of this particular premiere, and the predominance of teenage boys, the projectionist decided to display pornographic clips before and after the video. This exhibition perpetuated an attitude among male skateboarders that their entertainment is to be catered to at the expense of excluding or degrading the female population.

Fortunately, these extreme instances have been rare, and overall I have found the Montréal skateboard community to be somewhat inclusive of individuals, regardless of gender, race¹ or language. Montréal is a bilingual city, although primarily French-speaking, and among the skateboarders there are French, English, and multi-lingual speakers. The scene in Montréal is very intimate possibly due to the limited access to skateable terrain, since there are few skateparks near the city, consistent police harassment,¹ further, the long winters and days of waiting for the snow to melt inspires a sense of mutual understanding and appreciation for skateboarding. The origins and evolution of skateboarding primarily took place in California, but it is interesting to note that in Montréal there was also a thriving skateboarding scene in the 1960s. A documentary film entitled *The Devil's Toy* (Claude Jutra, NFB, 1966), which highlighted young French-Canadians cruising down Mont Royal hill and their frustrations with adults who disapproved of their activities. An abstract provided by the National Film Board of Canada explains, "Filmed in 1966 on Montréal streets before the elongated roller skate was banned, this film captures the exuberance of boys and girls having the time of their

¹ John MacFarlane, "Cramping their style: City's skateboarders hemmed in by city bylaw, police," *The Montréal Gazette* 25 May 2002: A1+.

lives in free-wheeling downhill locomotion.”² This film revealed how the skateboard was used by young people as a toy, regardless of gender, which brought them together in the city streets. The evolution of skateboarding in Montréal has not been thoroughly documented over the years, with the exception of an anthropological study in 1998 of the skateboarders who frequented a spot near Hôtel de Ville (City Hall) by Olivier Pégard.³ The theme that runs throughout both the documentary and the contemporary study is the conflict with adults who antagonize the youth and perpetuate the stigma that surrounds skateboarding as an activity for delinquents. It seems that little has changed although in October 1997 an indoor skatepark called the Tazmahal was built downtown to contain skateboarders in one place. Unfortunately, the skatepark was only temporary since the building was torn down in the spring of 2001 to build a library and was not replaced. The “Taz” was a popular meeting place and several of the girls I interviewed came in contact with each other at this venue and established friendships. I am aware of fourteen women in the Montréal area who skateboard consistently, often socialize together when not skateboarding, and are considered the core group of female skateboarders, although lately I have seen several younger girls practicing and suspect that there are more.

When a group of male skateboarders in Montréal decided to put together a magazine called *Exposé* about the local scene, released in May 2003, they requested that members of this core group contribute ideas regarding the content, as well as, two pages worth of articles and photos for every edition specifically about female skateboarders. The fact that the girls were included in this process was very refreshing since the usual

² “The Devil’s Toy,” *National Film Board of Canada*, Jan. 2003
<<http://www.cmm.onf.ca/E/titleinfo/index.ep!id=10495>>

approach within the skateboard media industry is to barely acknowledge our existence. I have always felt frustrated when it comes to the lack of representation of female skateboarders, considering the prevalence of predictable, male-oriented advertisements featuring semi-naked women displaying skateboard products placed strategically on their bodies, and meanwhile, very talented female skateboarders who deserve coverage are ignored. It has become obvious to me, after writing several letters to various popular skateboard magazines, which have never been printed, that change depends on the female skateboarders taking the initiative to do something positive for ourselves, because the guys are not going to do it for us. When the mainstream attempts to portray female skateboarders the result tends to be a more sexualized, distorted version of the actual participants under the guise of “Girl Power” that capitalizes upon the “cool” skater-girl image. In response, many female skateboarders have taken on the role of cultural producers by distributing zines, producing videos, organizing “all girls” competitions, and interacting within a virtual space through websites and discussion forums. Their growing presence at skateboard parks and in the streets is also changing the attitudes of some of those male skateboarders who are either adamant that girls should not participate or simply feel ambivalent towards these issues. I have even heard one male skateboarder express envy when he saw a group of us girls skateboarding together, because our energy and excitement reminded him of how it felt when he was younger, skateboarding with his friends for the pure joy of it. There are so many positive and creative aspects of skateboarding, and for me it is often the times that I listen to, interact with, and relate to other female skateboarders, which motivates me to continue skateboarding.

³ Olivier Pégard, “Une Pratique Ludique Urbaine: Le Skateboard sur la Place Vauquelin A Montréal,” *Cahiers internationaux de Sociologie* Vol. CIV (1998): 185-202.

I have recognized and explored how the activities of these young women are significant, particularly addressing their active participation in public spaces, their role as cultural producers, and their negotiation of feminine norms, all in relation to subcultural studies and discussions concerning gender and identity. Initially, several questions and debates emerged that provided me with some direction during the writing process. I wanted to determine the kind of female identity required or developed among female members of a male-dominated subculture like skateboarding when and if they are confronted with masculinist attitudes. I was aware of an imbalance of female representation in mediated forms like magazines and videos, and wanted to know if this was of concern or affected female skateboarders, perhaps motivating them to create visibility themselves, to distinguish themselves, or to develop a notion of solidarity or community. And, with the apparent growth in the population of female skateboarders, I was interested in distinguishing whether this reflected a change of attitudes in mainstream society that is filtering down to the subcultural level or was a result of young women wanting to protest mainstream society and traditional standards of femininity, or a combination of both. I do not claim to have resolved all of these inquiries, but I feel that my approach as an investigative participant, who engaged the opinions of others, while considering how this subculture intersects, confronts and conforms to the dominant culture, is a progressive and productive one.

To contextualize my research, I position it alongside and in contrast to other academic writings, such as that of Becky Beal, Iain Borden, Angela McRobbie, and Lauraine Leblanc. Beal suggests that male skateboarders often resist mainstream definitions of masculinity, preferring co-operation and self-expression rather than

“individualism, aggression, power, competitiveness, strength, stoicism, and protector.”⁴

Despite this form of “alternative masculinity,” Beal recognizes that stereotypical attitudes and gender divisions were still prevalent among her male subjects. The male skateboarders in her study associated femininity with delicacy and inability, and reasoned that girls do not skateboard because they are not interested in or are incapable of being “masculine,” which they felt to be a requirement for skateboarders. Borden refers to the writings of Henri Lefebvre in a discussion on how skateboarders use, manipulate and enjoy urban spaces, which puts them in conflict with those who want to preserve such spaces for private property owners and pedestrians.⁵ Angela McRobbie’s feminist critiques of subculture studies and the male researchers who established subcultural work in relation to male activity and production, helped me understand the historical roots of subcultural theory and its’ internal debate regarding female participants. I found Leblanc’s book, *Pretty in Punk: Girls’ Gender Resistance in a Boys’ Subculture*⁶ to be particularly relevant to my studies considering that the experiences and attitudes of punk girls and female skateboarders are comparable in that both groups infiltrate male-dominated subcultures and inhabit spaces that are not traditionally inviting to women.

I also make reference to my previous research on female athletes and the media, because there are many parallels between the experiences of female athletes and female skateboarders. There is a large body of work written about the lack of female athlete’s

⁴ Becky Louise Beal, “Alternative masculinity and its effects on gender relations in the subculture of skateboarding,” *Journal of Sport Behavior* 19 (Aug 1996): 205.

⁵ Iain Borden, *Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the Body* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2001).

⁶ Lauraine Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk: Girls’ Gender Resistance in a Boys’ Subculture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

representation and the sexualization of their bodies within the sports industry, a recent publication being *Black Tights: Women, Sport and Sexuality* by Laura Robinson.⁷ Robinson discusses how women athletes must negotiate their identity within an established masculine culture where their sexuality often becomes an issue that will determine whether or not they are accepted and promoted, depending on if they conform to traditional standards of feminine appearance. To be accepted as a genuine member of the skateboarding subculture is also of key concern for female participants, and like the sports realm, these standards are often set by the male skateboarders. Fortunately, female skateboarders have created an alternative community of their own, and now determine their own variations in style. This style incorporates subtle signs to distinguish themselves from mainstream imposters, for example, pop star Avril Lavigne who is notorious for her song “Sk8er Boi,” which is about a girl who regrets not dating a boy who skateboards, and is now being made into a feature-length Hollywood film. Lavigne and her version of skateboarding are generally mocked from within the subculture by both male and female skateboarders for being so contrived, although I will argue that subcultural authenticity is also contradictory in itself.

This thesis addresses the way in which female skateboarders negotiate mediated materials, such as videos, magazines, zines and websites produced by the skateboard media industry and individual skateboarders, as well as mainstream representations of skateboarders, found in movies, advertisements or televised events like the X Games on sporting channels. In response, skateboarders have increasingly been interested in documenting their activities through the aid of video as a way to celebrate, validate and

⁷ Laura Robinson, *Black Tights: Women, Sport and Sexuality* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers, Ltd., 2002).

promote their performance and lifestyle in a dynamic way. As video and editing equipment became more accessible for public use in the early 1990s, skateboarders began to film themselves and their friends, primarily for personal enjoyment, but also to create what is known as the “promo video.” This personalized video is sent to a skateboard company so that perhaps the company will sponsor the individual as an amateur, giving him or her free product like boards, wheels, “trucks,” and clothing, and eventually gain the status as a professional (when the skateboarder is given a “signature” model or receives an income to represent the company at demonstrations, tours, and competitions). Once the skateboarder is sponsored by a company, he or she is expected to continue filming tricks, so that the company can gather together the footage and produce a company video, which is meant to entice skateboarders to buy their product based on the talent and style of the company’s team. This process has in turn established a skateboard media industry, whose most popular productions, such as *Transworld Skateboarding*, often dictate what is current or “cool” regarding style of dress, music, popular tricks, etc. Due to this focus on documentation within the skateboarding subculture, I felt that it was important for female skateboarders to be recognized for what they have contributed, considering that they are often lost or ignored due to the myriad of videos and magazines produced worldwide each year.

The influence of mainstream media as an institution that contributes to, shapes, and determines socially-constructed gender norms, such as appropriate behavior for men and women, directs my research because it also influences subcultures like skateboarding. Subcultures may attempt to challenge mainstream society, but change may occur only to a degree and never seems to completely disrupt hegemonic practices

because they are so naturalized. Although, among the subculture sometimes balance can be achieved, and I would like to believe that skateboarding is evolving and, according to R.W. Connell, “When the relations between cultural elements change, new conditions for practice are created and new patterns of practice become possible.”⁸ Female skateboarders are such cultural elements creating change because they have begun to produce and control their representation through their own productions. Consequently, the popular skateboard media industry cannot ignore their growing presence, but must recognize the performance and persistence of female skateboarders.

In terms of my methodological approach, I began my research by interviewing women who skateboard regarding their experiences and opinions, and reflecting on my own history as a skateboarder. I had already acquired a good sense of what constitutes a female community of skateboarders due to my years of experience as a skateboarder in a variety of environments. As a trusted member of the skateboarding community in Montréal, I had insight into the interests and values of the women involved, who readily agreed to be part of this project. I also maintained my relationship with them by participating in social events, girls-only skateboard “sessions” and in our media productions, which gave me the ethnographic context to interpret the interviews. I interviewed nine female skateboarders from Montréal between the ages of 21 and 33, primarily in their early twenties (see Appendix). I also interviewed an 18 year-old woman, who had made the decision to take up skateboarding instead of observing her friends and boyfriend skateboarding from the sidelines. These women reflected in particular on their early experiences as novice skateboarders, meeting other female

⁸ R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) 289.

skateboarders, and their perspective of skateboarding in Montréal. Unfortunately, I only had the means to interview those skateboarders who were English-speaking or bilingual, which meant that I was unable to engage in intensive conversations with several younger skateboarders in their teens who spoke only French, although it was apparent that they appreciated being part of a female-dominated group of skateboarders. During the writing process it was interesting to see how the group evolved by recognizing their position as a distinct community, and also to take note of the various personal conflicts that caused some tension and divisions. The most rewarding experience during this period was the production of a video called *Boy* (Mathilde Pigeon, JoBlo Productions, 2003) that featured many of the participants in my study.

The women I interviewed were my peers, so the interviews took on a more informal, conversational dynamic, as I would often let my tape recorder roll while we were relaxing at someone's home. Other times I made the interviews more structured with planned questions, to gather specific information or to remind them of a particular story that they had recounted previously. I generally tried to let the discussion flow towards their interests, inspirations and concerns. Sometimes I was aware that my opinions were in opposition to what the interviewee was expressing, but I was careful not to interject or influence their ideas to correspond with my own. I did not want to write a paper that simply colluded with the female participants and idealized their activities, even though they were my friends. There were a diverse range of opinions and even contradictions, which at times made me question a belief in female solidarity because even in an intimate group of apparently like-minded women there are vast differences. I also chose to refer to several interviews already published in magazines about the few

professional female skateboarders, to provide some perspective from those women who are more involved within the greater skateboard industry. All of my personal interviews were recorded with their signed permission and conducted according to the guidelines established by Concordia University's Human Ethics Committee.

During the writing process I took into consideration two essays in particular, "Troubles in the Field: The use of personal experiences as sources of knowledge"⁹ by Anne Marie Fortier and "Women and the Early British Rave Scene"¹⁰ by Maria Pini, as relevant guides towards what I hoped to achieve. Fortier's study involved her entering an ethnic religious community where set codes based on a heterosexual hegemony were enforced, often restricting her movements, yet informing her research from this perspective. In regards to gender, Fortier states that, "examining my gendered position in 'the field' also means unwrapping the social processes through which that position *is* gendered. It involves unwrapping how our gendered positions are created and constantly reinvented and re-inacted - in short *performed* - through out interactions in the 'field.'"¹¹ Due to the history of subcultural research and its association with masculinity and deviance, I was particularly conscious of my gender both as a female researcher and as a skateboarder, because, as Pini explains, there have been few attempts to examine where and how women are located within subcultures.¹² The early work on subcultures was often performed by male researchers, like Paul Willis in his work on motor-bike boys,

⁹ Anne Marie Fortier, "Troubles in the Field: The use of personal experiences as sources of knowledge," *Critique of Anthropology* 16 (1996): 303-323.

¹⁰ Maria Pini, "Women and the Early British Rave Scene," *Back to Reality: Social Experience and Cultural Studies*, ed. Angela McRobbie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997) 152-169.

¹¹ Fortier, 306.

¹² Pini, 153.

who reflect broader sexist attitudes by identifying with their male subjects and excluding females from their studies.¹³ I did not want to repeat this process by suggesting that female skateboarders are an exclusive group of radicals, when their relationships with male skateboarders are inevitable and are generally positive. I also recognized that I had to monitor and question my research methods because there was the potential for me to resort to a mode of constant identification with the girls, considering that I have shared many of their experiences. At the same time, this was an empowering process for me comparable to Fortier's study, when she realizes that, "the experiences 'inside' and 'outside' 'the field' fed into each other in my own reflexive process on what and who I was/am and was/am becoming."¹⁴

It was my goal to produce a thorough and broad representation of the experiences of female skateboarders and also to be self-reflexive. At times, I insert myself into the dialogue and include the statements that I made during interviews, because I felt that I would rather acknowledge my responses, than maintain an intellectual barrier as a distant, elite academic. This practice reflects Liesbet van Zoonen's description that, "Feminist researchers have found ways around the inequalities involved in the research encounters, for instance by studying their own direct experiences, preferences and surroundings."¹⁵ My methodological approach became a kind of "identity ethnography,"¹⁶ an interactive research process, which does not claim to offer a singular truth, but rather attempts to

¹³ Paul Willis, *Profane Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

¹⁴ Fortier, 308.

¹⁵ Liesbet van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 1994) 129.

¹⁶ Angela McRobbie, "Post-Marxism and cultural studies," *Cultural Studies*, eds. L. Grossberg, C. Nelson and P. Treichler (London: Routledge, 1992) 730.

reveal how experience is “lived, negotiated and understood through a variety of ‘storying practices’ and it is through such processes that identities are produced.”¹⁷ To account for the distinct identities that emerge from this form of research, I maintain a feminist perspective that acknowledges the diversity of these voices and highlights the similarities. My work also corresponds with Stuart Hall’s explanation of the post-modern subject, which can no longer be experienced as a stable identity, for one is often composed of contradictory, fragmentary, or unresolved identities.¹⁸ I have considered the fact that the female skateboarder is not always skateboarding, and therefore, how she will choose to negotiate and maintain her identity in different environments.

I begin my thesis by providing a brief history of women skateboarders within Chapter One. I make reference to academic literature written on skateboarding, and account for the mainstream perception of skateboarding as a masculine domain. This chapter describes some of the zines, websites, videos, and documentary films made by and about female skateboarders, and their role as cultural producers. Chapter Two highlights the female body, femininity, and how female skateboarders challenge traditional concepts of the role of women. I expand upon discussions posed by writers on women and sport, and incorporate the responses from my interviewees regarding such issues. Chapter Three critiques subcultural theory, and how feminist academics have attempted to resolve issues concerning the exclusion of girls, and the focus on masculine identity. I explore how this relates to the experience of female skateboarders and the internal debates regarding authenticity and style. Chapter Four features the responses

¹⁷ Pini, 155.

¹⁸ Stuart Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” *Modernity and its Futures*, eds. Stuart Hall, David Held and Tom McGrew (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986) 276-277.

made by my interviewees in the context of Montréal and their personal stories, and issues of space based particularly on Lefebvre's texts. And finally, the Conclusion highlights how female skateboarders have become subjects by producing space and expressing a female version of reality, and why it is necessary to adjust past subcultural theories to account for the active participation of female members.

The idea of writing this thesis has evolved from initially wanting to address issues that relate to skateboarders in general, such as the contestation for urban space and the co-optation and commercialization of skateboard style by the mainstream. These issues are mentioned in my paper, but after I realized that I was constantly returning to my own experiences and those of other female skateboarders as points of reference, I decided to focus on their participation as gendered subjects. I had written to a friend, who is a male skateboarder, about some of my early ideas, including a chapter on female skateboarders. He recognized my enthusiasm to include the perspective of girl skaters, but was concerned that I not put so much emphasis on this aspect, suggesting that I produce a broader analysis of the skateboarding culture. It was at this time that I made my decision to highlight the experiences of female skateboarders rather than marginalize them because girls' activities have often been dismissed for not being genuine or a reflection of the whole scene. Female skateboarders may not be in the majority, but they still occupy a space that is significant and unique, and continue to develop an international community of their own.

*Chapter One: A Brief History of Female Skateboarders and
Their Relationship to Skateboard Media Production*

Skateboarding is a subculture primarily known for its resistant practices that challenge those who attempt to preserve “public” space and private property for respectable citizens. Skateboarding has been condemned as an illegal activity, with city by-laws enacted to restrict their movement in the streets. When skateboarders do not abide by these rules confrontation and conflict with police, security guards or pedestrians sometimes erupts. This form of criminalization perpetuates the delinquent image of the skateboarder, which, in turn is frequently highlighted and celebrated in skateboard videos as a rite of passage. Michael Willard explains, “In the process of making a skate video, the camera also inevitably documents encounters between skaters and security/police forces or irate adults. Inclusion of such scenes in skate videos is also common.”¹ The skateboard video is an influential aspect of the subculture, because it presents a lived experience of skateboarders in a dynamic visual form, which are usually filmed and produced by skateboarders. Visual representation of skateboarding has also been key to the subculture’s evolution because these images illustrate innovations in skateboard performance and style, as well as filming techniques and the use of media technology, and create a subcultural history. “This youth-produced history is quite often absent from the ‘public’ record produced by more powerful adults.”² But, as I will explore, even

¹ Michael Nevin Willard, “Seance, Trickknowlogy, Skateboarding and the Space of Youth,” *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in 20th Century America*, eds. Michael Nevin Willard and Joe Austin (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 330.

² Willard, 338.

among “youth-produced” histories there can be absences, which in the case of skateboarding has been the history of female participants and their contributions. This chapter will introduce the skateboard media industry in comparison to mainstream practices, establish a brief history of skateboarding from an alternative, female perspective, and then explore the significance of recent cultural developments in the subculture instigated by and for women who skateboard.

Skateboarders have always been interested in documenting their lifestyle and progress, resulting in a skateboard media industry that includes countless magazines and videos devoted to the activity since the 1960s. Magazine titles like *Transworld Skateboarding*, *Thrasher*, *Skateboarder*, *Slap*, and *Big Brother* are now established as the popular skateboard media industry, with international distribution and authoritative pronouncements on skateboard trends. The media industry may reflect and influence the subculture, but this does not mean that skateboarding is in isolation from the dominant society. Therefore, stereotypical attitudes regarding appropriate sex-roles are also prevalent and perpetuated within the subculture. According to Iain Borden, a common contradiction of skateboarding is its representation of women, considering that, “skateboard companies and magazines have increasingly used misogynist treatment of women as a way of selling skateboards,”³ and meanwhile, “female skaters are not explicitly discouraged, their relative absence is only occasionally noted and implicitly condoned.”⁴ The skateboard industry, which includes “companies that manufacture and

³ Iain Borden, *Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the Body* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2001), 147.

⁴ Borden, 144.

sell skateboard parts, accessories and clothing”⁵ is male-dominated and is focused upon appealing to the teenaged male majority through various strategies, particularly an image of subcultural authenticity (see Ch. 3). It is interesting to note that although there are women involved at the production level of popular skateboard companies and magazine publications, working as marketing directors and brand managers, there is little questioning by them of the use of sexually explicit board graphics or the lack of inclusion of female voices and images among the texts.⁶ There may be women involved in the skateboard industry, but their presence appears only to be a token gesture that reflects a hegemonic practice where an illusion of progress is presented, but in reality the male members and their interests remain the priority. Hegemony attempts to normalize a belief even among subcultures that it is better to conform to a patriarchal environment for individual, personal gain, than question the system and promote female solidarity. Therefore, it is essential to contextualize subcultures in regards to mainstream society to reveal their points of intersection and diversion, which suggests that there can be “alternative” and “dominant” values present simultaneously within a subculture.

Female skateboarders have always participated throughout the history of skateboarding, but their accomplishments are rarely promoted by skateboard media productions, both large and small-scale. *Transworld Skateboarding* produces the most popular monthly skateboard magazine. Taking their April 2003 issue as an illustration, out of the 338 pages of articles and advertisements, there was a photo of Jessie Van

⁵ Becky Beal and Lisa Weidman, “Authenticity in the Skateboarding World,” *To The Extreme: Alternative Sports, Inside and Out*, eds. Robert E. Rinehart and Synthia Sydnor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003) 345.

⁶ Luciana Ellington, “Skate Business Women,” *Check it Out: Skateboarding for Girls* Vol. 14 (Winter 2003): 21-23.

Roechoudt and another of Alexis Sablone, two prominent female skateboarders, as well as a review of a female-oriented skateboarding website. As meager as this is, this edition was an exception to the norm, which typically includes no reference to females skateboarding at all.

Skateboarding has gone through several trends and cycles of popularity, and these movements have had a major affect on female skateboarders. Skateboards emerged in the 1950s as an innovation of a child's toy, by applying two sets of roller skates to a board, and the first commercial skateboards called the Roller Derby Skateboard hit the marketplace in 1959.⁷ In 1963, the first skateboard contest was held in Hermosa, California, and skateboarding was established as a popular youth activity. In the 1960s and early 1970s women excelled at the freestyle and slalom disciplines, which consisted of performing flat-ground tricks like spinning 360 degrees, and weaving through obstacles down a hill. Borden states that, "Female skaters have always existed even while broader conventions discourage them from skateboarding. As one female skater put it, 'we are few and far between, but we are out here.'"⁸ He also speculates that possibly 25 per cent of skaters in Southern California in the 1970s were female. Female legends from this era include, Pat McGee, who appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine in May 14, 1965 doing a hand-stand on her skateboard, and competitive skateboarders such as, Ellen O'Neal, Robin Logan, Ellen Berryman, Kim Cespedes, Laura Thornhill, who "became one of the first female skaters to have her own signature model,"⁹ and Peggy Oki. Oki

⁷ Michael Brooke, *The Concrete Wave: The History of Skateboarding* (Toronto: Warwick Publishing, 1999) 16.

⁸ Borden, 143.

⁹ Michael Brooke, *Skate Legends* (Toronto: Warwick Publishing, 2002) 62.

was the only female member of the notorious Zephyr Skate Team from the “seaside slum” of West Los Angeles, California nicknamed “Dogtown” and featured in the award-winning documentary film, *Dogtown and Z-Boys* (Stacy Peralta, Sony Pictures Classics, 2001).

The stereotypical representation of the delinquent skateboarder finds its origins in the Dogtown skateboarders who transformed skateboarding from being a faddish knock-off of roller-skating to a subculture with its own codes and symbols. Oki, a hardcore surfer, joined the Zephyr Team at age 18 and fit in well with the rebellious group. It was at the Del Mar Nationals in 1975 “where the Z-Boys made their debut (and skate history), showcasing an aggressive attitude and unique style that would come to dominate the sport within a year.”¹⁰ Oki’s performance was particularly controversial because even though she

was the only Z-Boy to win first place in freestyle at the Del Mar... the women in her division were hardly accepting. At the time, most girls in skateboarding were very feminine, some wearing little shorts and skating with bare feet. [Oki explains,] ‘They were into doing these little ballerina-like tricks. I was into 360s and nose-wheelies and endovers and things that were fun to do... all I wanted to do was go fast and slalom and skate banks.’¹¹

As a result of the female competitors protesting Oki’s unconventional style, her name was not included on the winner’s list, and after several frustrating experiences at contests, she eventually made the decision to focus on her education, while other Z-Boys went on to acquire fame and sponsorships. Oki continues to skate and surf today, as well as pursue an activist/environmental lifestyle that is reflected in her artwork.

¹⁰ Denise Williams, “The Lady of Dogtown,” *Push Skateboard Magazine* Vol. Free Supplement within *International Longboarder Magazine* Vol. 3.4 (Summer 2002): 2-3.

¹¹ Williams, “The Lady of Dogtown,” 3.

With their roots in surfing, the Z-Boys then transferred their skills from the waves to skateboarding in empty pools, often on private property, which they would access by trespassing. A skateboard “session” at a pool was an intense affair since it was known that the police would be quickly contacted if they were discovered. The skateboarders’ adrenalin would be running high, with everyone pushing each other to be next in line before time ran out. As quoted by Borden, skate legend Steve Alba explained to *SkateBoarder* magazine that, during a pool session, “You gotta be able to skate good and fast, run good and fast or else be able to fight good... It’s every man for himself. If the cops come, you’re not going to be holding your friend’s hand. Everybody’s just going to go their separate ways...”¹². During these sessions there was a feeling of tension and energy because skateboarders were very territorial and information regarding the pool’s location was often secretive. As male skateboarders sought out the risky terrain of pools, they increasingly took on a masculinist attitude that reflected their social-outcast status and rejected female participation.

The pools in particular thus became places of initiation, dangerous (through accident or social confrontation) places where young men might prove themselves to their peers... The focus here was on danger, pain and bodily injury, but also on the competitively collective nature of the group, created from a set of extreme individual attitudes and actions.¹³

Female skateboarders were rarely included in these sessions, because it was assumed that they could not handle the aggressive scene, skate the steep transition, or defend themselves when pursued by the police. And perhaps, women were just not interested in being intimidated by male skateboarders within this confined space.

¹² Borden, 49.

¹³ Borden, 52-53.

Cement skateboard parks were then designed and built for public use and allowed more skateboarders to gain confidence riding this terrain. Vicki Vickers, who was inspired by Dogtown legend Nathan Pratt, was not to be phased by the new vertical concrete skateboarding or the macho attitude that ensued during the late 1970s. “In an interview with *SkateBoarder* [December 1979], Vicki lamented the poor coverage of female skaters and the lack of respect that pro women skaters were receiving. ‘I’ll be damned if we’re not out there breakin’ our necks just like the guys... we’re gettin’ burned. How many issues has it been since you’ve seen a girl’s face? About five.’”¹⁴ This sort of statement could easily be directed towards popular skateboard magazines today, but what has changed is that female skateboarders are no longer waiting for male-owned and operated productions to accommodate them. This attitude has emerged due to the persistence and visibility of several talented female skateboarders.

After a short-lived boom in popularity, skateboarding went into decline as parks closed due to concerns over insurance and injuries, and only a few individuals continued to skate into the early 1980s. A skateboarder named Carabeth Burnside maintained her passion for vertical ramps and pool-riding during this period. Burnside began skateboarding in the mid-1970s as a child. “‘I went to this new skate park,’ she says. ‘The Powerflex Team was there, and oh my God, this one girl was just charging! I ditched my roller skates and started skateboarding the next day.’ By 12, she was winning competitions, attracting sponsors and starring in a half-hour TV special about a new girl in town who becomes a skateboarder.”¹⁵ When skateboarding stopped being a popular

¹⁴ Brooke, *Skate Legends*, 56.

¹⁵ Jennifer Egan, “Girl Over Board,” *Conde Nast: Sports for Women* Vol 2.4 (April 1998): 135, 166.

youth activity Burnside took up soccer and karate, but returned to it while attending university, although women skateboarders had practically disappeared. “Over time, Cara Beth surpassed the other female skaters she rode with and found herself skating with men only... which made her feel very uncomfortable.”¹⁶ In an interview by Jennifer Egan with Don Bostick, the co-owner of World Cup Skateboarding, it is explained that, “male skaters in the eighties, influenced by the music and attitudes of punk rock, were hostile to women. ‘The guys heckled them,’ he says. ‘A girl had to be pretty ballsy to drop into a pool. The guys sort of machoed them out of the way.’”¹⁷ Burnside also pointed out that, it was difficult for females to feel part of the skateboarding scene considering that, “Who wants to go skateboarding at 13 and get made fun of by guys?”¹⁸ Evidently, very few females persevered during this time. Burnside briefly established her own board company and competed against the men in the “vert” competitions, but it was only until 1998, with the growing popularity of extreme sports did she receive significant financial support from *Vans* skateboard shoe-company. *Vans* designed a popular “signature” Carabeth shoe, featured her in several advertisements, and promoted her reputation as a skateboard legend. Burnside continues to compete professionally in both skateboarding and snowboarding, and organized an all-female skateboarder summer tour in 2003, where the participants performed demonstrations at skateboard parks across the United States.

In the late 1980s, skateboarding made another development in an urban setting where obstacles found in the streets like curbs, ledges, handrails and stairs began to be

¹⁶ Brooke, *Skate Legends*, 81.

¹⁷ Egan, 166.

¹⁸ Egan, 166.

utilized. It is within the streets that the identity of skateboarding as a subculture, in contrast to those who conform to acceptable standards of social behavior, was established. As a result, female skateboarders were further marginalized considering that, as Angela McRobbie explains, “It has always been on the street that most subcultural activity takes place... it both proclaims the publicisation of the group and at the same time ensures its male dominance. For the street remains in some ways taboo for women...”¹⁹. There are always exceptions to these rules, but it became increasingly difficult for female skateboarders to gain acceptance in this era. A hardcore punk attitude was prevalent among the skateboard community in the 1980s, with aggressive music accompanying their activities, skateboard graphics that displayed sexualized images of women, and several prominent professional skateboarders, like Christian Hosoi and Craig Johnson made statements that females should not skate at all.

There was some progressive activity during this period, which Borden discusses in detail, when the skateboard manufacturer called “Powell-Peralta” produced a female-oriented advertising campaign. A series of advertisements came out announcing that “Some Girls Play With Dolls. Real Women Skate” in *TransWorld Skateboarding* magazine in December 1987 and February 1988, featuring skateboarders Leaf Trienen and Anita Tessensohn posing with their boards.²⁰ “Powell-Peralta” was an interesting and influential company, as the former skateboarders George Powell and Stacy Peralta innovated the shape of the skateboard, further developed the urethane wheel (as opposed to the original clay wheels) and they were also the first company to use video as a

¹⁹ Angela McRobbie, “Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Critique,” *Screen Education* 34 (Spring 1980): 47.

²⁰ Borden, 144

promotional tool.²¹ “Powell-Peralta” recognized the potential of video as a medium that could display the dynamic energy of skateboarding in action and be used to promote their company and team of riders. The Powell-Peralta video titles include, *Bones Brigade* (1984), *The Search for Animal Chin* (1985), *Future Primitive* (1986), and *Ban This* (1989), which used “manipulated tracked shots, skateboard-mounted cameras, special lighting, overlays, montage, film stock and high-design graphics.”²² Even with their progressive intentions, “Powell-Peralta” still presented a “boys-only” mentality.

Notably another Powell-Peralta advertisement, contemporary with their ‘Real Women Skate’ advertisement, purported to show ‘just some skaters’, but close inspection of the scene depicted discloses that all of the skaters just happen to be male. Practices such as these do much to signify the assumption that all skateboarders are male.²³

It is evident that “Powell-Peralta” was primarily interested in capital gain and displayed double standards by encouraging female participation, as well as perpetuating a male-centric representation of skateboarders.

“Powell-Peralta” was extremely influential and their early skateboard videos encouraged and inspired skateboarders in general to push the boundaries of what could be done with a skateboard. With the increasing accessibility of video and camcorder technology in the 1990s, skateboarders were also experimenting with creating their own videos, and using them for both personal pleasure and as promotional tools, by making a “promo video” to attract the attention of corporate sponsors. These videos reveal a history of skateboarding, including the evolution of equipment, like the shape, size and materials

²¹ Brooke, *The Concrete Wave*, 99.

²² Borden, 117.

²³ Borden, 144.

of the board and wheels, the lingo, technicality of tricks performed, style, and appearance of skateboarders. Innovative methods of documentation have also resulted, such as “video magazines” like *411VM* which began in 1993 as a magazine with interviews and advertisements, distributed monthly in video format and is now widely imitated.

In the mainstream media, the skateboarder image and lifestyle has also been appropriated, beginning in the 1980s with films like *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, Universal Studios, 1985), *Thrashin’* (David Winters, Fries Entertainment, 1986), and *Gleaming the Cube* (Graeme Clifford, Twentieth Century Fox/Rank, 1988). It is not surprising though that none of these films featured female skateboarders. In a comparable critique of sports media, Kidd remarks that, “By publicly celebrating the dramatic achievements of the best males, while marginalizing females as cheerleaders and spectators, they validate the male claim to the most important positions in society.”²⁴ Skateboarders may not be the most valued members of society, but within the subculture it is the male members who retain the most privilege, especially as the target audience for media productions.

Skaters are shown to be predominantly young men in their teens and early twenties, with broadly accommodating dispositions toward skaters of different classes and ethnicity. Gender relations are, however, more problematic, with female skaters usually discouraged by the forces of convention, including within skateboarding those of sexual objectification.²⁵

And it appears that there has been little progress regarding a more accurate or diverse representation of the subculture, even with the imminent release (Aug. 22, 2003) of the Warner Bros. film *Grind* (Casey LaScala, Warner Bros, 2003). *Grind* displays the life of

²⁴ B. Kidd, “Sports and Masculinity,” *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on Pleasure, Power and Change*, ed. M. Kaufman (New York; Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 255.

²⁵ Borden, 263.

professional male skateboarders, who sign autographs, perform frat-boy antics, and meet female spectators clad in bikinis. Apparently, there is a female skateboarder character named Jamie in the film described in previews as the “sexy skate chick.” I actually dread viewing this movie and cannot decide whether it is better to have no representation of female skateboarders at all, or a sexualized Hollywood version that attempts to capitalize off the recent “cool” skater-girl image. With little assistance from the popular skateboard industry, let alone mainstream media representations of skateboarding, female participants have had to forge a space for themselves and assert their identities.

In this contemporary era of skateboarding it has been skateboarders like Elissa Steamer who began to challenge the naturalized assumption that skateboarders are typically male. Steamer is of particular importance to this movement because the skateboarding world was completely disrupted when she became sponsored by *Toy Machine* skateboard-company, and produced ground-breaking feature parts in their videos, *Welcome to Hell* (1996), and in *Jump Off a Building* (1998). To some critics, Steamer was regarded as a “token girl skater” with unusual and exceptional skill, and many felt threatened by her talent, and regarded her style and appearance as masculine. Paul Willis, in his article, “Women in Sport in Ideology” explains that, the popular response to the female athlete is one of

uncertainty before the deviant, distrust of the strange, dislike of the marginal... Instead of confirming her identity, success can threaten her with a foreign male identity... To succeed as an athlete can be to fail as a woman, because she has, in certain profound symbolic ways, become a man.²⁶

²⁶ Paul Willis, “Women in Sport and Ideology,” *Sport, Culture and Ideology*, ed. Jennifer Hargreaves (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986) 123.

This was often the attitude directed towards Steamer, but there were others who felt that regardless of this predictable, dismissive response, she was a vision of the future for female skateboarders and a role-model. The skateboard community has credited her as being “the best female skater to ever live and she doesn’t even care.”²⁷ Her public attitude has generally been flippant and tough, but at times she expressed frustration and paranoia when on display at skateboard demonstrations and competitions, sensing that people were ridiculing her. Despite these moments of unease, her talent as a skateboarder has provided her with a professional “signature” skateboard model with *Bootleg*, a shoe sponsorship through *Etnies*, a character playing-figure in the video-game *Tony Hawk: Pro Skater*, and meanwhile, she continues to be seen in skateboarding advertisements and videos. Steamer was also included in an anthology by Michael Brooke called *Skate Legends*, where he states that, “She is an intense, aggressive skater who is not scared to attack rails, ramps or whatever else is in her path.”²⁸ For many female skateboarders, Steamer is recognized as living proof that girls are capable of performing technical tricks and have a right to enjoy themselves, occupy space at skateboard parks and in the city streets, and even pursue sponsorships.

Due to Steamer’s visibility within the modern skateboarding scene, female skateboarders began to elevate their performance standards and gain confidence in their identity. Female skateboarders also began to come together in the mid-to-late 1990s, to support and encourage each other with more focus than previous attempts, as they were motivated to access the opinions and experiences of other female participants. An

²⁷ Sean Mortimer, “About a Girl,” *Skateboarder* 9 (Jan./Feb. 2000): 47.

²⁸ Brooke, *Skate Legends*, 152.

important development was New York City-based, *Rookie* skateboards, the first female-owned skateboard-company who gathered a strong team of primarily female skateboarders in 1996 and began featuring them in their advertisements. This was the beginning of a slow infiltration of images of female skateboarders into the popular skateboard media industry. A message that female skateboarders were “out there” was being stated, and there would always be a buzz of excitement among my friends when a new photo was printed of sponsored riders Jesse Van Roehoudt, Jamie Reyes, Lauren Mollica and Lisa Whitaker. The owners, Catherine Lyons and Elska Sandor were irritated when they were initially labeled and dismissed as a “girls’ company,” but when this wore off *Rookie* emerged as a respected skateboard company with a unique mentality that has even appealed to some male skateboarders, rather than as a specialty company just for girls.²⁹ Female skateboarders now regard *Rookie* as a status symbol, suggesting that one is “in the know” regarding the company’s significance, which I will discuss later in reference to subcultural style.

Female skateboarders continue to be considered a novelty because they are often isolated geographically or dispersed in a major city. But, in an attempt to interact with each other, an alternative community through zines, websites and internet forums has been developed. Zines are often hand-written and photocopied documents with a certain “Do-it-yourself” quality, and include collaged drawings, photos and stories. The *Villa Villa Cola* zine was started in 1997 by skateboarding sisters Tiffany and Nicole Morgan from San Diego, and ran for three years before the members chose to pursue other projects. It featured photographs, artwork, travel diaries, reviews, and an advice column

²⁹ Arrissia Owen, “No Hoochie Skater Girls: Catherine Lyons and Elska Sander,” *Wahine Online Magazine* 6 (2000) < <http://www.wahinemagazine.com/issue/rookie.html> > Jan. 2003.

for readers to write in about everything from learning how to skateboard to herbal medicine. The zine had an international following and expanded into a website,³⁰ clothing-line and an independent video called *Striking Fear into the Hearts of Teenage Girls* (1998), featuring Faye Jamie, Van Nguyen, Lori D., Jamie Sinift, and Lisa Whitaker. The production inspired many others to do the same, such as *Bruisers* made by Heidi in New Orleans, *Check it Out Girls*³¹ by Liza and Ana Paula from Brazil, a zine out of California called *SwashBuckler*, and *50-50: Skateboarding and Gender* made by Zanna in Portland. *50-50: Skateboarding and Gender* is the most oppositional zine of those mentioned because it questions and critiques the skateboard industry, describing acts of defiance. For example, Zanna recalls the time she went to “Burnside” (a famous skateboard spot in Oregon) and when she saw a graffiti tag that said, “Fat girls suck,” she promptly changed it to say, “Fat girls rule” and was subsequently beat up by some of the guys skateboarding. It was experiences such as these that motivated Zanna to begin making her zine, to reveal another side of the skateboarding scene, which often goes ignored by the popular skateboard media industry.

The zines created by female skateboarders are comparable to those produced by the “riot grrrls,” who were young feminist-minded women associated with the punk music movement and discussed by Marion Leonard in her article, “Paper Planes: traveling the new grrrl geographies.” Leonard explains that, these female writers “offer a visual critique of beauty standards and expected behavior by juxtaposing text and

³⁰ *Villa Villa Cola*, May 2003 <<http://www.villavillacola.com>>.

³¹ *Check it Out: Skateboarding for Girls*, July 2003 <<http://www.ciomag.net>>.

illustrations taken from comics, advertising, teen magazines and fashion photography.”³² *Villa Villa Cola* would commonly use collage and drawings to present a satirical representation of traditional femininity, which R.W. Connell defines as a femininity that is “organized as an adaptation to men’s power... emphasizing compliance, nurturance and empathy as womanly virtues...”³³. The zine never made obvious political statements, but had an ironic quality, for example, in Issue #5 there is a photo section where Faye Jamie is shown performing skateboard tricks while carrying a hand-bag. In the last photo Faye hurls the bag to the ground, which suggests that such feminine accessories only impede her skateboarding even though the caption reads, “stupid skateboard, always getting in the way of my purse.” The zine used humor to encourage girls to skateboard and offered advice on how to overcome being intimidated by guys, such as learning with friends. The members have recently reunited and plan to design new zines and videos for distribution.

The original VVC girls realized that they had similar experiences and opinions on the direction media and industry had taken girls’ skating in the last two years. [Nicole explained that] ‘We shared horror stories, and we all unanimously voted to reintroduce VVC as an honest representation of what it is to be a female skater, or any skater for that matter.’³⁴

Through the persistence of these creative women a network of female skateboarders was developed and has been maintained.

Skateboarding is a very physical subculture where identity is truly established by the actual doing of skateboarding often in public spaces. Even though zines are a textual

³² Marion Leonard, “Paper Planes: traveling the new grrrl geographies,” *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures*, eds. Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine (London; New York: Routledge, 1998) 105.

³³ R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) 188.

production that positions the makers indoors, this creative process is an outlet that develops a very personal relationship to the subculture. And there is a strong artistic movement among skateboarders who use their artwork to fuel their passion for skateboarding and vice versa. Leonard also remarks that private space, like the bedroom “is not a neutral location for it is often regarded as the feminised space of teen consumerism... However, through the production of a zine, this private space becomes a site of activity.”³⁵ Female skateboarders gain a sense of community through zines and perhaps more confidence to skateboard in public spaces, even when they might not be in physical contact with other girls.

According to Leonard, zines are tools for empowerment because they are “spaces of articulation, promoting a rhetoric of inclusion”³⁶ and this definition can also be applied to websites and internet forums, which are increasingly being occupied by young women. The virtual territory that girl skaters are creating includes, “Betty Boards,”³⁷ “Girls Skate Better,”³⁸ “Gurlz on Boardz,”³⁹ “The Side Project,”⁴⁰ “Skate of Mind,”⁴¹ and “Frontside Betty.”⁴² Several of the sites have reclaimed the once derogatory term

³⁴ Denise Williams, “Villa Villa Cola,” *Push Skateboard Magazine* Vol. 1.2 (Spring 2003): 21.

³⁵ Williams, “Villa Villa Cola,” 107.

³⁶ Leonard, 113.

³⁷ *Betty Boards*, Jan. 2003 <<http://www.bettyboards.com>>.

³⁸ *Girls Skate Better*, June 2003 <<http://www.gsbzine.com>>.

³⁹ *Gurlz on Boardz*, Jan. 2003 <<http://www.realskate.com/gob.htm>>.

⁴⁰ *The Side Project: Girls Skateboarding Network*, April 2003 <<http://www.thesideproject.com>>.

⁴¹ *Skate of Mind*, June 2003 <<http://www.skateofmind.org>>.

⁴² *Frontside Betty*, Jan. 2003 <<http://www.frontsidebetty.com>>.

“betty,” which was applied to female skateboarders to suggest that they were tomboys and unattractive by mainstream standards, to be an empowering label. In “Frontside Betty” webdesigner Denise Williams writes,

Once upon a time, I was a lonely girl skater in a big city. I went to the indoor park a few days a week, but there were never any other girls there and the guys seemed to want little to do with the girl in the corner teaching herself kickturns. As much as I loved skating, it was necessary to give myself a serious pep talk to get motivated to go back to the park each day.

On the wall beside my desk there was a picture of Jessie Van that I’d torn out of a magazine, one of the few pictures of a female skater that I’d seen in print. Each time I needed motivation, I looked at that picture and it reminded me how much I enjoyed skateboarding, how much I had a right to be a skateboarder, and how it wasn’t worth it to let loneliness and lame people get in the way of that. I went back to the park.

So began Frontside Betty, a site for girl skateboarders and anyone who loves them. We’re frustrated by the small amount of skate resources online (and off) that include girls in the skateboarding world. The ratio of male to female skaters is ridiculously lopsided, and the representation of girl skaters in the skateboarding media is even more so. Frontside aims to be a resource of images, reviews, information, and stories for the world of girls’ skating. Because not only do we deserve it, but sometimes we need it. We love feedback, news, story ideas, and hellos, so contact us.⁴³

“Frontside Betty” has a detailed links section of other related sites of interest to female skateboarders, a chat forum to connect the users, and the site itself is always expanding by accepting written and visual contributions from female skateboarders. The rest of the skateboard community is finally taking notice, and the responses are generally positive. In a recent review of the “Frontside Betty” site in *Transworld Skateboarding* magazine, it begins, “A whole Web site devoted to females on skateboards? Yep. It’s pretty damn cool, too... Overall, there’s excellent pictures and coverage, a good links section, and a

⁴³ Denise Williams, “About Frontside Betty,” *Frontside Betty*. Jan. 2003
<<http://www.frontsidebetty.com/about/index.html>>.

Web forum to keep everyone in touch.”⁴⁴ This brief mention of the website in the most popular skateboard magazine is worth noting, but amongst the hundreds of pages of advertisements and articles featuring male professional skateboarders, I was fortunate to happen upon it.

Women like Williams have not been deterred by the rare inclusion of female-oriented skateboard activities and as of the winter 2003 she began producing the first-ever, free skateboard magazine called *Push* devoted solely to female skateboarders with a complimentary website.⁴⁵ The magazine has been received very enthusiastically. I was skating at Jarry Park in Montréal with five other girls when the Spring 2003 edition was distributed to us by a friend. We pored over the 32 pages, discussing the interviews, product reviews, letters, mock horoscopes, and photos, and were inspired by what we saw because finally this was a magazine just for us that was not tainted by an outsiders’ conventional view of what it means to be “extreme” and feminine. The content of *Push* is also in contrast to the genre of magazines dubbed “girls’ magazines,” which tend to offer advice on relationships with boys, make-up, and clothing, and celebrate teen pop stars. Catherine Driscoll explains that,

Girls’ magazines provide one space in which girls’ relations to each other and to social norms can be observed... The proliferation of eroticized images of young women in these texts, while more generally registered by readers in terms of body types and lifestyles, depend on intimate recognition of other girls. This ideal body remains enclosed, clean, and impermeable, despite the actions and desires of particular girls.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ A. Bird, “Webslingers,” *Transworld Skateboarding Magazine* Vol 21.4 (April 2003): 94.

⁴⁵ *Push Skateboard Magazine*, May 2003 <<http://www.pushskatemag.com>>.

⁴⁶ Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 156-157.

Instead, *Push* is primarily a skateboard magazine, which ideally should appeal to anyone who skateboards, and yet happens to highlight the activities and accomplishments of women who experience pleasure from their bodies as active subjects. These female-oriented zines, websites, forums, and now the *Push* skateboard magazine have established an alternative skateboard media industry, in response to the skateboard magazines sold at the corner store, which tend to have a rigid format that rarely gives female skateboarders any recognition.

In regards to representation of female skateboarders in videos, this has occurred primarily when exceptional sponsored women are given a part in their company video, which was the case with Steamer and more recently by Sablone in a very successful video called, *P.J. Ladd's Wonderful Horrible Life* (2001) distributed by the skateshop "Coliseum" in Boston. Besides these rare cameos, there have been several documentaries on female skateboarders, including *Live and Let Ride* directed by Tara Cooper (Independent, 1999). This thirty-minute film included interviews with *Rookie* co-founder Sandor, and both amateur and professional participants, such as Burnside, Van Roehoudt, Jen O'Brien and Jodi Macdonald. Cooper also displayed male and female skateboarders offering their opinions on gender issues and the lack of media representation for girl skaters within the subculture, and portrayed a variety of female skateboarding experiences. The tricks performed were still not comparable to the standard of professional male skateboarders, but the footage was inspiring considering the usual poor coverage of females skateboarding in other videos. The documentary was an admirable attempt at presenting the lived realities of female skateboarders, and made a statement that despite the broad range of skill levels among these girls they all deserve to

participate and be respected for their efforts. *Live and Let Ride* was screened at select independent events, but not distributed like most skateboard videos to skateboard shops for public sales, instead the film can be ordered by contacting Cooper through the “Gurlz on Boardz” website.

The documentary film, *AKA: Girl Skater* (Mike Hill, Whyte House Productions, 2002) is the most recent challenge to the exclusive male practices within the subculture and also confronts traditional definitions of femininity by exhibiting active female participants and an insightful commentary. The film documents a team of professional female skateboarders who are sponsored by *Gallaz*, a skateboard shoe company designed for women, and their adventures while on a trip to Australia, where they perform demonstrations and compete in the 2002 “Globe World Cup of Skateboarding” girls’ street event. In anticipation of the film’s release, a stylish website called “Girl Skater” was designed. The site explains that,

AKA: Girl Skater is a documentary film that gives a fascinating insight into the unique and rapidly emerging subculture of skaters...*AKA: Girl Skater*. The film features the action footage and interviews with the Worlds most talented female skateboarders Jamie Reyes, Vanessa Torres, Amy Caron, and Monica Shaw...
AKA: Girl Skater - see the face of modern skating change before your very eyes.⁴⁷

On the website, the viewer can watch footage from the film, including a trailer, sneak previews of the girls’ video parts, visual advice towards landing a new trick, and a “slams” section. The slams section, which is a common feature of the skateboard video, described more thoroughly in Chapter Two, celebrates the failed attempts at landing a trick as much as the successful tries, and reflects a unique camaraderie among the female participants, which is often lacking among male professional skateboarders.

⁴⁷ *Girl Skater*, Jan. 2003 <<http://www.girlskater.com>>.

As a documentary film, *AKA: Girl Skater* fills a void that films like *Dogtown and Z-Boys* produced regarding the position of female skateboarders. The intention of *Dogtown and Z-Boys* was primarily to highlight a key moment in skateboarding history, the evolution of the Zephyr team, the creativity of Craig Stecyk, whose photos and stories mythologized the scene as a “culture,” and the influence of three prominent male skateboarders, Tony Alva, Jay Adams and Stacy Peralta. The film alluded to the macho, rockstar attitude that developed particularly among professional skateboarders like Alva, but besides the brief glimpses of Oki skateboarding, and her comment regarding how she was treated by envious female competitors after winning at Del Mar, the film focused upon the male perspective of this skateboard movement. *Dogtown and Z-Boys* emphasized the aggressive activities of the male skateboarders and cultural contributions of men involved with the scene, and offered little reflection regarding how this masculine persona has impacted the skateboard community. When subcultures are naturally equated with masculinity, and women are relegated to the position of passive spectator, female participation continues to be viewed as exceptional and abnormal.

The *AKA: Girl Skater* documentary, like *Dogtown and Z-Boys* is an inspiring visual product that reflects an influential time and group within the subculture. Even though it has not attracted mainstream attention to the same degree, the girls’ contribution has been recognized among the skateboarding community and welcomed by female members. *AKA: Girl Skater* was reviewed in most of the websites and magazines designed by female skateboarders, as well as the popular skateboard magazine *Slap*. The author acknowledged how skateboarding tends to act like a fraternity, but that it is important to support female skateboarders, especially when girls are coming up and

can put a lot of male skaters to shame...there is also some skating in here that will make most skaters say, 'Hey, that chick rips!' and not add on 'for a girl.' *AKA: Girl Skater* is also worth seeing to get an insider's perspective on what it's like to experience skating from another viewpoint.⁴⁸

The girls featured in the film are not your typical teenagers when they perform a boardslide or grind down a handrail, and launch over flights of stairs. But, it is obvious through their interaction with one another that they are not quite like the average male skateboarder either, in that they exhibit so much energy and pleasure doing what they love as a group of girls. Dave Carnie, an editor of *Big Brother* skateboard magazine who accompanied the team and reported on the trip,⁴⁹ commented within the film that the girls were a

weird little subclass, you know like how skateboarding used to be... like the punks, a group that people would see occasionally. Skateboarding's everywhere now but how often do you see a clique of girl skaters? I'd much prefer seeing this secret society with their own rules and mores and untainted by fame, grandeur, which a lot of the male skateboarding world has been poisoned by right now. Everyone's just too cool to even skate. The girls just go at it.

Carnie offered some insightful remarks, particularly regarding how a women's division in professional contests will encourage young girls to participate. Although, by focusing upon his involvement with the girls' skateboard tour the documentary suggests that female skateboarders need to be validated by a male expert. Despite this criticism, it is still the determination of these young women that has the most impact on the viewer.

In *AKA: Girl Skater* it is remarkable to see how talented the skateboarders are and to imagine how amazing they and the girls that they inspire will become. Torres remarked that, "I've got so many more years on my board right now and I've already

⁴⁸ Mark Whiteley, "AKA: *Girl Skater* documentary DVD from Gallaz shoes," *Slap Skateboard Magazine* No. 130 (March 2003): 139.

learned so much that there's only more to come and more for me to progress." Shaw exclaimed with a laugh that, "I reckon there's going to be heaps of young chicks coming up, I'll feel old in a year and they'll be able to whoop my ass!" This is an exciting time for female skateboarders, who have persevered throughout the history of skateboarding and are proving that their presence within the subculture is here to stay. In this generation, female skateboarders have taken it upon themselves to act as cultural producers by creating their own visibility through zines, magazines, websites, and videos, and have established a unique community of their own. These women have instigated a subcultural movement, which continues to gain momentum. The following chapters will highlight issues regarding femininity and the subcultural identity with reference to the community of female skateboarders in Montréal and their experiences.

⁴⁹ Dave Carnie, "Gallaz in Australia: An All-Female Skate Tour," *Big Brother Skateboarding* No. 85 (June 2002): 68-83.

Chapter Two: Body, Femininity, Identity and the Female Skateboarder

Bruises, scars and injuries are an inevitable aspect of skateboarding because it is a physically challenging activity where a successful trick, even the most basic trick called the “ollie,” which involves manipulating the board so that it appears to stick to one’s feet when jumping, is only learned through countless trials and errors. Skateboard media productions by both local, small-scale groups of skateboarders, and large-scale, popular skateboard companies, tend to promote this grueling aspect within videos in what is known as the “slams” section. Skateboarders often do not regard falls as failed attempts at performing a trick, but rather, as proof of the skateboarders’ commitment and toughness. For example, in *The Reason* (1999), which was a video produced by *Transworld Skateboarding*, there was footage that displayed skateboarder Paul Machnau breaking his leg while performing an advanced trick, that involved flipping the board in the air, while clearing a set of stairs. The video documented his trip to the hospital and his positive outlook during recovery, as he looked forward to getting back on his skateboard. The attention Machnau received from this visual account of his accident actually benefited his skateboarding career and brought him significant recognition in an industry that is becoming swamped with talented yet generic male skateboarders, who tend to perform the same tricks with a similar style. And yet, the perpetuation of skateboarding as a daring, brutal activity through videos and the “slams section” promotes an attitude that skateboarding is masculine and is male-dominated for this particular reason, rather than considering other aspects, such as the social expectations of feminine passivity or the lack of encouragement from the skateboard media industry.

In Becky Beal's research on skateboarding and masculinity in the early 1990s, she writes that, "...the bruising of one's body demonstrates a traditional masculine characteristic of risking bodily injury."¹ This traditional masculinity can also be described as "hegemonic masculinity,"² which asserts that aggression, power, and physicality are attributes of the male identity often developed through sport. Sport is no longer an exclusively male domain, and women athletes have challenged attempts to divide sport into masculine and feminine categories, as well as the lack of media support in sports pages and television sports coverage. Women athletes are now garnering more attention in the media spotlight than previously, but this progress is not without contradictions. Even resistant sport practices are diffused when sportswomen, for example, compromise themselves to suit the demands of the consumer-driven sports world that often sexualizes and pacifies their body through advertisements and a form of sports journalism that draws attention to their domesticity and critiques their sexuality. I am reluctant to label skateboarding as a sport, since it often encompasses many diverse and creative aspects of the skateboarder's lifestyle, but I see parallels between the ways in which female skateboarders, like women athletes have infiltrated a male domain.

Female skateboarders often negotiate the pressure to be "one of the guys" and gain acceptance as an authentic skateboarder from their male peers, and the pressure to assert some identification with feminine ideals due to a society that considers the aggressive nature of skateboarding to be a masculinizing activity. Many of Beal's male

¹ Becky Louise Beal, "The Subculture of Skateboarding: Beyond Social Resistance," Diss. University of Northern Colorado, 1992: 167.

² R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

interviewees described their skateboarding injuries with pride, but they considered the roughness of skateboarding to be the reason why more girls would not want to skateboard because “girls don’t want to have scars on their shins”³ or because they “don’t look good with bruises.”⁴ These responses are commonly heard, and perhaps they do explain why female skateboarders remain in the minority, but I have decided to instead focus upon the opinions of those women who actually do skateboard. In this chapter I will discuss traditional notions of femininity and the ideal female body, highlight comparable research involving women and sport, and then consider how female skateboarders negotiate their sense of identity through skateboarding.

A binary relationship between masculinity and femininity has been established to the extent that we are used to thinking of the female body as passive, obedient, frail, and inferior. We do not associate it with rough physical activity that results in bruising. R.W. Connell notes that there are varying forms of femininity, based on strategies of resistance, compliance and negotiation with hegemonic masculinity, but that there remains a dominant form of femininity, which he defines as “emphasized femininity.” This femininity reflects a broad subordination of women oriented towards “accommodating the interests and desires of men,”⁵ and according to Connell, this is a cultural construction, one that can be performed by women for the benefit of men. Nathalie Koivula explains that, “Females are also socialized to use their bodies to please others, value themselves based on their passive ornamental qualities through the

³ Beal, “The Subculture of Skateboarding,” 166.

⁴ Beal, “The Subculture of Skateboarding,” 166.

⁵ Connell, 183.

masculine eyes of others, and to compare their appearance with that of the dominant feminine ideal.”⁶ The dominant feminine ideal corresponds to an ideology of biology that insists upon gender divisions, which women display through their appearance, dress and style. “One of the most familiar features of sexual display is behaviour and clothing that emphasizes stereotyped sex differences... ‘girls’ emphasize their vulnerability in tight skirts and high-heeled shoes, sheer stockings and make-up that is constantly in need of repair.”⁷ This need for constant maintenance and reaffirmation of one’s femininity suggests that it is an unstable cultural performance. Nancy Theberge writes,

Skin care, hair care, and hair styling; the proper application of makeup; and the selection of clothes are best understood as disciplinary practices whose outcome is the achievement of a feminine embodiment and feminine subjectivity. These disciplinary practices are important not just as statements of sexual difference. They are part of the process by which the ideal body of femininity, and hence feminine subjectivity, is constructed.⁸

Women’s magazines and television advertisements, in particular, construct and sell emphasized femininity to women, who seem to need reassurance that they are complying with socially acceptable standards. Laura Robinson feels that these magazines reflect an attitude that women “have to read and be helped along to be feminine... It’s even like failure is feminine because we obviously can’t be women on our own. We need so much help all the time.”⁹ McRobbie also explains that femininity always appears more uncertain and less secure than masculinity because “of the images and texts of advertising

⁶ Nathalie Koivula, “Perceived characteristics of sports categorized as gender-neutral, feminine and masculine,” *Journal of Sport Behavior* 24 (Dec. 2001): 377-393, CD-ROM ProQuest, Feb. 2003.

⁷ Connell, 181-182.

⁸ Nancy Theberge, “Reflections on the Body in the Sociology of Sport,” *Quest* 43 (1991): 127.

⁹ Laura Robinson, *Black Tights: Women, Sport and Sexuality* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers, Ltd., 2002) 121.

and all the other beauty and fashion features to strengthen this fragile feminine identity...”¹⁰. The fragile, vulnerable female identity is necessary to maintain the binary that positions men and masculinity as superior.

The feminine image presented in the media is practically unattainable, so that most women are left feeling insecure and inadequate, which is hardly a mentality that gives rise to a desire to challenge these social structures. Therefore, the culture of femininity remains intact as a subordinate culture and this “influences not only women’s work opportunities but also their use of leisure, and their domestic and family commitments...”¹¹. An ideology of domesticity is imposed on women at a young age through magazines where,

Romantic attachment and dependency on men is emphasised, and advice on emotions, make-up and fashion is given... presenting an escapist unproblematic world... Girls then have two sources of socialisation for their future, school and at home, backed up by a media interpretation of femininity which adds a sense of fatalism about marriage and motherhood.¹²

Therefore, to pursue leisure activities like skateboarding may never occur to young women, especially those who only refer to women’s magazines as a source of guidance and if it has occurred to them, it is often only considered in the context of meeting young men to acquire a boyfriend.

The ideal feminine body, as displayed and sold by magazines with their representations of air-brushed models, is passive, fragile and flawless. Even the sporting

¹⁰ Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture: From ‘Jackie’ to ‘Just Seventeen’* (Hampshire: MacMillan, 1991) 176.

¹¹ Sheila Scraton, “‘Boys muscle in where angels fear to tread’: Girls’ sub-cultures and physical activities,” *Sport, Leisure and Social Relations*, eds. J. Horne, D. Jary and A. Tomlinson (New York; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987) 180.

¹² Michael Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture: The Sociology of Youth Cultures and Youth Subcultures in America, Britain and Canada* (London; Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985) 166.

female body has been defused of its powerful potential because sportswomen have become objectified for being slim, sculpted and toned, rather than strong, aggressive and muscular. This image is a result of a long history of skepticism regarding the sexuality of the female athlete since sport was originally deemed a realm where men develop their masculinity, and female athletes were thus labeled “mannish,” “deviants,” and “lesbians.” “By ‘discrediting’ all women in sport as lesbians, men can rest assured that their territory is not being invaded by ‘real’ women after all; by mobilizing social prejudices against homosexuality, they may be able to keep the number of women involved in sport to a safe minimum...”¹³. This attitude led to an unfortunate situation where lesbian athletes felt pressure to appear in “feminine drag” and deny their sexuality in an attempt to “pass” as straight, and heterosexual women athletes would resent the association to lesbianism and emphasize their femininity, since femininity and heterosexuality has been established and constructed as one and the same. If the female athlete defended her position or simply continued to pursue her sport, she ran the risk of being ostracized by society and the media. Robinson states that,

I believe that when any woman wants to compete in her own sport, with her own body, in the same arena as a man – instead of for that man’s affection – she challenges the notion that she is a ‘real’ woman... Her body exists not to give pleasure to men, but for her own pleasure. And because theoretically she doesn’t need the attention of men to confirm her status, the female athlete represents a threat to masculinity that must be marginalized.¹⁴

This process of marginalization is taking its course, so that the challenge for women athletes today is often not “to conquer new athletic feats, which would only further

¹³ Susan Birrell and Nancy Theberge, “Ideological Control of Women in Sport,” *Women and Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Margaret D. Costa and Sharon R. Guthrie (Windsor: Human Kinetics, 1994) 353.

¹⁴ Robinson, 60.

reduce their sexual appeal, but to regain their womanhood through sexual surrender to men.”¹⁵ The accusations of being a lesbian and becoming masculinized “serve to discredit *both* straight and gay women professionally so that men can retain their status advantage and maintain control of resources.”¹⁶ Such resources include corporate funding, which athletes and their teams rely heavily on, especially as professionals. Pat Griffin explains that as “women’s sport has become more visible, potentially marketable, and increasingly under the control of men and men’s sport organizations”¹⁷ the association of sport with lesbians has gone under closer scrutiny.

Corporate sponsors rarely want to be associated with lesbians, often for the same reasons that heterosexual athletes want to avoid the lesbian stigma, since it suggests “mannishness” which might be threatening and unappealing to mainstream consumers. There are some recent examples where the “gay market” is pursued, for example, several teams in the Women’s National Basketball Association, like the Miami Sol, Sacramento Monarchs and Los Angeles Sparks, have sought the support of their lesbian fans by campaigning at lesbian bars and hosting a “Gay Pride Night,” but this is very rare.¹⁸ Instead, most female athletes experience corporate pressure that suggests that the feminine appearance of the female athlete is no longer sufficient, and “corporate sponsors, professional women’s sport organizations, some women’s college teams, and

¹⁵ Susan K. Cahn, “From the ‘Muscle Moll’ to the ‘Butch’ Ballplayer: Mannishness, Lesbianism, and Homophobia in U.S. Women’s Sport,” *Feminist Studies* 19 (Summer 1993): 352.

¹⁶ Donald Sabo and Michael A. Messner, “Whose Body is This?” *Women in Sport: Issues and Controversies*, ed. Greta L. Cohen (New York: Sage Publications, 1993) 19.

¹⁷ Pat Griffin, “Changing the Game: Homophobia, Sexism, and Lesbians in Sport,” *Quest* 44, (August 1992): 254-255.

¹⁸ Patrick Hruby, “Coming Out,” *Insight on the News* Vol. 20 (August 2001): 32.

individual athletes have moved beyond presenting a feminine image to adopting a more explicit display of heterosex appeal.”¹⁹ Women athletes, such as tennis star Anna Kournikova and volleyball player Gabrielle Reece, have been constructed and commodified as objects of heterosexual desire, and the message is that if a sports woman does not conform to such standards, then she loses out on sponsorship and funding. Even with the increasing visibility of women athletes in the media, there has been no real shift in power when the underlying message is that feminine sexuality is more important than sporting ability. The “success” stories are more often for enterprising individuals like Kournikova, who are not concerned with issues of female solidarity and agency, but have instead, used their hyper-feminine appearance for personal financial gain even though they are not the top athletes in their sport. There are female athletes who challenge and resist this trend to heterosexualize their image for the benefit of sponsors and the sports media, but this is proving to be difficult considering the strong affiliation of sport to hegemonic masculinity. Perhaps emphasized femininity can only be truly challenged from a subcultural level. The intention of subcultures, which I explore further in Chapter Three, is to disrupt mainstream society and even though this is often done inadvertently through symbols and signs, and rarely produces a revolutionary impact, these resistant practices can still be influential.

The situation for female skateboarders is not identical to that of female athletes, but there have certainly been attempts by male skateboarders to discredit their performance by insinuating a lesbian or mannish identity. While some women skaters have responded to this behavior by opting for a more accentuated feminine appearance, and even marketed themselves as being such, others have retaliated in a humorous

¹⁹ Griffin, 255.

manner. Vanessa Torres, in *AKA: Girl Skater* mockingly remarked that, “Because I skate, I’m practically a man... with a nice ass!” There is also a “crew” of women who skateboard from Australia, New Zealand, Scotland and England, who call themselves the “Gayskullz” and have developed a collaborative website,²⁰ which plays with and celebrates their apparently ambiguous sexuality and “tomboy” appearance. The members of “Gayskullz,” by accentuating and highlighting sexuality with reference to both straight and lesbian sexual activity, have proven that they are stronger than snide, derogatory remarks intended to make them subordinate, and as a result, those who make such comments look immature and insecure. The website has a chat forum and advice column that often uses highly-sexualized language, and a photo gallery that includes images of the girls skateboarding, as well as, exposing their most colourful bruises with pride.



Figure 1 Female skateboarder and a hand injury sustained from skateboarding.

²⁰ *Gayskullz*, June 2003. <<http://www.theskullz.com>>.

There is a constant risk of falling and injuring oneself when skateboarding, and skateboarders “often discuss their injuries as a means of displaying their dedication to the risk-taking nature of skateboarding.”²¹ While Beal feels that this practice reflected a celebration of masculinity, I will argue that for the female skateboarder, these bruises and scars are also symbolic, in that they visually contest an attitude that women must remain flawless and inactive to be feminine. This does not necessarily mean that female skateboarders intentionally want to be injured or solely identify with what might be considered their “masculine” side, but rather, they have realized that femininity can also be about a woman being confident in her body and its potential to perform challenging activities. It is interesting to note that, there are times when I fall while skateboarding and the male skateboarders present seem to express more concern for my injury than if I was a guy who had experienced the same fall, but this response often provokes me to skate harder. In my interviews, injuries were discussed with enthusiasm and perhaps with an additional sense of celebration since the experience distinguishes the female skateboarder as someone who defies and makes visible the dominant construction of femininity. Marie-France, who is 33 years old and has been skateboarding for three years, recalled an injury she acquired.

I hurt my finger and my knuckle and it was bleeding like hell, but it wasn't such a big thing, but the skin had come off. And it was just like... gushing blood, and it looked really terrible. And on the metro, I had my hand and my wrist full of blood, and people were just looking at me, and I was just there sitting with my board. I looked so gore, you know? It was hilarious!²²

²¹ Beal, “The Subculture of Skateboarding,” 132.

²² Beal, “The Subculture of Skateboarding,” 132.

Marie-France was aware that people were observing her on the metro and yet, instead of being embarrassed or uncomfortable, she found the incident humorous. Mathilde, who is 22 years old and has been skateboarding for six years, was reflecting upon the argument made by some male skateboarders who say that girls only participate to find a boyfriend. She exclaimed that, “I wouldn’t break my ass every fucking day just to go out with guy skateboarders... I wouldn’t get bruises and stuff!”²³ Her friend Amy, who is 21 years old and has been skateboarding for three years, responded by saying,

When you spend the whole summer trying to learn something and then you do it and you did it, and you were like, ‘That was so much fucking better than anything ever’ it doesn’t matter that the last thirty times I tried to do it I broke my legs and smashed myself up. I dunno, I think it feels good to get beat up by a skateboard sometimes.²⁴

Even after breaking her arm while skateboarding in an indoor “bowl,” Amy was pleased that she had had the opportunity to go skateboarding during the winter and did not regret what happened. After she removed the cast, she explained her positive attitude. “When I hurt my shoulder, I went to the skatepark anyways, and just watched and studied skateboarding like the whole time. And the whole time I’ve been hurt with my arm, I’ve been really inspired, doing lots of skate-related stuff, like lots of visualizing.”²⁵ Amy maintained her interest in skateboarding by watching videos, participating on internet discussion boards, writing poetry, and anticipating her return to skateboarding.

To the outside observer, one might think that these injuries cease after several years of experience, but it is actually a constant reality even for professionals because one

²³ Mathilde, Personal Interview, 6 Dec. 2002.

²⁴ Amy, Personal Interview, 6 Dec. 2002.

²⁵ Amy, Personal Interview, 21 Feb. 2003.

can never stop learning to skateboard. A trick can always be taken one step further, for example by performing it off of a larger set of stairs, learning to skateboard “switch,” or incorporating a stylish variation of the trick. Marie-France remembered how, as a beginner, “I started by myself in front on my street, smashing myself all over the place to figure out how this thing was working! And it was pretty pathetic. I was bruised... I looked like I was beat up each night!”²⁶ Even after gaining some experience skateboarding, there is also the hazard of injuring yourself due to unforeseen obstacles, like rocks and cracks in the streets. Marie France was cruising down Ste. Catharine street, a busy Montréal street downtown, when suddenly her wheels got stuck in fresh tar.

I was covered head to toe in tar! And I had all those little rocks on me and especially on me knee, too! And it became so big. I had that for months, I even had to go to the hospital for a few months to get it drained because it was becoming bigger and bigger, it was super annoying. It was so funny because I arrive at Peace Park and I was just covered in tar – I was just pissing my pants, it was so funny.²⁷

There is a real sense of celebration in these anecdotes even though Marie France obviously experienced discomfort as a result of her injuries. Skateboarding is often perceived as a “cool” activity, but there are times when you do not look cool, but rather quite ridiculous. As Amy explained, girls in particular must overcome the fear of looking foolish if they really want to learn to skateboard. Amy stated that,

I see a lot of girls who obviously want to skate, they hang out and you see them at a park and they’re like, ‘Oh yeah, can I try your skateboard?’ And they stand on it... But they’re not breaking through themselves, [but are] worried about looking stupid, which is so stupid when you think about it, that people are actually so self-conscious... But, nobody even notices.²⁸

²⁶ Marie France, Personal Interview, 27 Feb. 2003.

²⁷ Marie France, Personal Interview, 27 Feb. 2003.

²⁸ Amy, Personal Interview, 6 Dec. 2002.

The learning process is always a daunting experience, but it is made easier by skateboarding with friends who understand that everyone must go through this initial phase of learning and feeling awkward, and are capable of laughing about it.

When discussing skateboarding with random people, I often hear from both men and women, that they had tried skateboarding in their youth, but were not interested in pursuing this activity because of the potential falls and injuries. Therefore, I do not justify the reason that there are fewer female skateboarders than males, based solely on the fact that women, in general, are afraid to fall, because there are many men who would attest to avoiding the activity for the same reasons. I interviewed one eighteen-year old woman named Nathalie, who had grown up being surrounded by male skateboarders due to her sister's friendship with them, and had occasionally given it a try. She only made a commitment to participate after being introduced to the group of girls in Montréal while watching her boyfriend skateboard. She explained her frustrations with skateboarding.

When I started hanging out with skaters, I would jump on a board... like the first time I jumped on a board, I was like, 'Yo, I can do this!' I had total confidence... and I was like 14. But then the first time that I actually got hurt, I was like, 'Screw that shit!' But it wouldn't last very long and I would still be really, really curious about it, to get back on. I would try again, then hurt myself and I was, 'Screw that shit, again!'²⁹

Skateboarding obviously takes persistence, and Nathalie compared it to "falling off a horse," something that she keeps coming back to. Nathalie was enthusiastic about the video that the girls in Montréal had made, and came to the premiere party. Nathalie was particularly inspired by Julie, who is twenty-three years old and has been skateboarding for seven years. Nathalie exclaimed,

²⁹ Nathalie, Personal Interview, 22 Feb. 2003.

I was sitting there watching the movie, [Julie] would take those bails and just come out of it with the biggest smile, not give a damn, and I was like, my biggest fear...is because of falling and hurting myself. Just watching her fall, like hardcore, just get up, and like, whatever! You have to fall to progress. A few bruises and a few broken bones... it's inspirational I think.³⁰

When I asked Julie if she was concerned about injuries, she replied that she was, especially after experiencing her first ankle sprain, but overall she preferred not to think about it. Although, she did recall the time she sprained her ankle with animated frustration, to the amusement of the group of girls who were gathered during our interview, because the injury occurred right before an all-girls competition in New York, which she was entered. "I was so pissed off, I broke my board. And it was amazing... I crushed the nose and crushed the tail... but I didn't break it in two, I can't I'm too light... Fuck! (laughter)."³¹ There is the potential to seriously damage oneself when skateboarding, but this does not deter most skateboarders since each individual has their own personal limit of what they are capable of and set their own goals accordingly. Within the documentary, *AKA: Girl Skater* professional skateboarder Amy Caron explained that, "I don't really do anything that's really uncomfortable for me like where I know I could fall or fall really bad... I just do tricks that I'm comfortable with, and have fun you know, not try the biggest trick in the world." Jamie Reyes then remarked, "If I want to go kickflip some stairs or whatever, or skate a handrail, if I get hurt, as long as I gave it all I got, when I get better I'll just try it again and overcome the fear."

In my interview with Brigitte, who is twenty-nine-years old and has been skateboarding for a total of eight years over a sixteen-year period, she felt that her level

³⁰ Nathalie, Personal Interview, 22 Feb. 2003.

³¹ Julie, Personal Interview, 21 Feb. 2003.

of skill was limited because she was female. She explained that because the female body is different from the male body, especially the center of gravity meant, that a female skateboarder should not compare her ability to that of a guy's or hope to be as good.

You see some guy doing a trick, you can't go, 'Oh, I can do that'... Women are more fragile, I believe... You can't really have that attitude that if he can do it, I can do it... You can just try. But when you see some girl doing the same thing, you're like 'Okay, I can do it.' It's encouraging a lot more... We have the same shape, or the same physique, the same approach. We have the same fears. Men don't have the same fears as women... Girls who are good at skateboarding are tough... and I wouldn't bug them in a bar. But hey, we're all in it for the fun.³²

Brigitte was expressing a contradiction that some female skateboarders struggle with considering that, on average male skateboarders do perform more advanced skateboard tricks than female participants, and yet there are young women who are at the same level of ability as the men, although they are often stereotyped as tough and more "masculine." Brigitte has always been enthusiastic about organizing girls-only skateboard sessions and described being inspired by other female skateboarders, but by adopting conventional ideas about gender suggests a self-deprecating performance of femininity. As Rhianon Bader explains, during an interview with professional skateboarder, Jessie Van Roechoudt, "Stereotypes for girl skaters are either a girly-girl who can't do anything, or a butch."³³ And, these stereotypes have been established and presented in the media to dismiss women's participation in physical activities. Van Roechoudt then expressed how she aimed to achieve a situation where future female skateboarders do not have to deal with these attitudes, but will rather be accepted as simply a skater. There are obviously a variety of opinions among women who skateboard regarding ability, while some believe that girls have the potential to be as good as the guys, others prefer to differentiate

³² Brigitte, Personal Interview, 8 Feb. 2003.

themselves from both the guys and the girls who have skills comparable to the guys. This approach is taken by some female skateboarders perhaps to reassure themselves that they are “feminine,” and remain content with a lower standard of ability rather than challenging themselves to excel. It would be unfair to imply that all girls, as well as guys, have the same potential to become professional skateboarders since some individuals are naturally more talented, but my concern is that a distinction between talented skateboarders and average skateboarders should not be made based on gender or a greater identification or resemblance to “masculine” characteristics.

Identity is constantly under negotiation, which means that a young woman might appear progressive, because she is a skateboarder, but may still have acquired beliefs that correspond with hegemonic notions regarding women and their natural role in society. In the summer of 1999, during my stay in the Czech Republic, I met two female skateboarders who were very welcoming. I had made some assumptions that because they were female skateboarders they must share similar sentiments regarding feminism and equal opportunities for women. I was surprised when one girl was adamant that feminism was wrong, and that, even though she planned to go to University, she intended to be a housewife and felt that it was a woman’s duty to serve her husband. I respected her opinion, acknowledging that we were from different backgrounds whose countries have different histories, but this discussion impressed upon me how much influence one’s cultural and familial institutions have over one’s identity. Despite these differences, I was impressed with the girl’s determination to skateboard, and suspect that they also admired my independent nature, that is reflected through a celebratory appreciation of active living that embraces persistence, dedication, and even injury.

³³ Rhianon Bader, “Jessie Van Roechoudt,” *SBC Skateboard* Vol 5.2 (Summer 2003): 128.

During one skate session in the Czech Republic, I was trying a trick called a “noseslide” on a ledge, but ended up falling onto my shin against the sharp edge. I was hesitant to go to the hospital for stitches because my travel insurance had run out and opted for a band-aid. Instead of being ashamed of my superficial “flaws,” I prefer to value my scars as visual evidence or reminders of a particular session, the people I was with, or the spot that I was skateboarding at. When I am skateboarding and hanging out with my friends, it sometimes becomes an anti-beauty competition, where we compare who has the most bruised-covered shins, and we will often document a particularly gruesome injury for additional proof, since bruises and cuts eventually heal. In her interview for *Skateboarder*, Elissa Steamer was asked about being concerned with acquiring scars, and she responded, “I gave up on worrying. I could probably set a world record for scars on a girl’s hand.”³⁴ The reason that these women participate in skateboarding is obviously not limited to pleasing the male participants, even though there are some male skateboarders who consider girls who skateboard to be “cool” and attractive, but this is secondary for most female skateboarders who have a sincere passion for skateboarding as an activity and as a lifestyle, despite the consequences.

There are many physical consequences of skateboarding, but there are also rewards, such as the thrill of landing a new trick and knowing that your body is capable of doing something extraordinary. When a skateboarder manages to pop, flip and rotate his or her board and body in the air, and makes it seem effortless, it is truly a remarkable sight. This feeling of power and control is similar to when athletes improve upon a personal best race time or competition result, but different, in that the intention of

³⁴ Sean Mortimer, “About a Girl,” *Skateboarder* 9 (Jan./Feb. 2000): 48.

skateboarding is not to exercise, develop or manipulate one's body, for example, to lose weight or gain muscle, which motivates many athletes, but simply personal pleasure. This manipulation of the body by athletes proves that, "Sport has been and remains a particularly powerful ideological mechanism because it is dominated by the body, a site of ideological condensation whose manifest meaning is intimately bound to the biological."³⁵ What is unfortunate is when people feel that they must accentuate their biological differences to be considered "normal" or desirable and are no longer motivated simply to improve their body, but become obsessed with expectations concerning gender performance. We see this when, for example, young men feel pressure to use steroids to acquire a more muscular, masculine appearance, while young women diet, work-out and resort to drastic measures such as anorexia to lose weight and accentuate their feminine appearance. And then, when women dare to develop their muscles as body-builders, they are sometimes met with harsh criticism and controversy surrounds them. "It may be suggested that masculinizing and feminizing practices associated with the body are at the heart of the social construction of masculinity and femininity and that this is precisely why sport matters in the total structure of gender relations."³⁶

The participation of female skateboarders, like female athletes, has often been questioned in terms of their sexuality. There has been an underlying criticism that girls have the ulterior motive of wanting to learn to skateboard so that they can find a boyfriend, even though many professional male skateboarders flaunt their "cool" status to

³⁵ Cheryl L. Cole, "Resisting the Canon: Feminist Cultural Studies, Sport, and Technologies of the Body," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 17 (1993): 86.

³⁶ David Whitson, "Sport in the Social Construction of Masculinity," *Sport, Men, and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives*, eds. Michael Messner and Donald Sabo (Champaign IL: Human Kinetics Publishers, Inc., 1990) 23-24.

acquire girlfriends, a practice that is celebrated in magazines and videos. In Beal's research, a 25 year-old male skateboarder explained that, girls skateboard "because they want to meet cute guys, or their boyfriends do it."³⁷ This dismissive comment was reiterated several times by other interviewees, especially regarding novice female skateboarders. These interviews were conducted before women like Elissa Steamer became visible in the skateboarding media, proving that girls can develop a high level of skateboarding performance, rather than pursuing potential boyfriends. But, the attitude was then adjusted to imply that such a girl could only be a lesbian. In Steamer's interview, she was questioned about what male skateboarders she had crushes on and references were made to her ex-boyfriend, although to her credit she did not succumb to the pressure to assert a statement of heterosexuality but simply explained that she did not want a boyfriend, although, "Eventually I'll fall in love. Maybe."³⁸ The stereotype that competent female skateboarders are less attractive and less feminine is perpetuated in skateboarding magazines. Even in the positive review for the film *AKA: Girl Skater* the author mentions that, "Most guy skaters think of skating and girls as separate worlds, and generally don't like them to overlap – dating a girl with a big purple hipper, road rash on the ass cheeks, and scabby shins and palms isn't what most male skaters are after."³⁹ It is interesting that, despite these attempts to dismiss the female skateboarder for being less desirable by hegemonic standards and for having an ambiguous sexual identity, this is not the attitude of all male skateboarders. There seems to be a discrepancy between the ways

³⁷ Beal, "The Subculture of Skateboarding," 170.

³⁸ Mortimer, 48.

³⁹ Mark Whiteley, "AKA: *Girl Skater* documentary DVD from Gallaz shoes," *Slap Skateboard Magazine* No. 130 (March 2003): 139.

in which the skateboard media promotes what type of woman is to be desired versus the actual lived relationships between male and female skateboarders.

In a study on women in the windsurfing subculture, Belinda Wheaton and Alan Tomlinson acknowledge that there were also women who were marginal, inactive participants, such as girlfriends and groupies “who negotiated an identity in the mixed sex environment by emphasizing their heterosexual femininity, particularly through their clothing and feminized appearance.”⁴⁰ This situation is comparable to the skateboarding subculture where it seems that for those women who are interested in skateboarding, yet are concerned with displaying an emphasized femininity because they would like to acquire the approval or sexual attention of male skateboarders, they have simply not taken up skateboarding, but rather become a groupie. These are the women who are sexualized in skateboard advertisements, who are employed to pose and parade themselves at skateboard trade shows, displaying a certain company’s logo, and who flock to skateboard demonstrations hoping to get a signature from a male professional or go back to the team’s hotel with one of them. It is interesting to note that this sort of heterosexual relationship, where the female spectator flaunts over the male sports hero is promoted during corporate events like trade shows and by companies such as *World Industries* or *Shorties* whose prime interest is selling product in an exploitative fashion that might seem rebellious and appealing to some consumers. These values, in reality, have nothing to do with the actual doing of skateboarding, but rather reflect the existence

⁴⁰ Belinda Wheaton and Alan Tomlinson, “The changing gender order in sport? The case of windsurfing subcultures,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 22 (Aug. 1998): 252-274, CD-ROM Proquest, Feb. 2003.

and infiltration of dominant capitalist practices within the subculture. According to Erika, a 28 year-old skateboarder of eight years,

The skateboard industry is shitty. There are more guys than girls who skate, but there are lots of girls who are involved in the industry. Those types of girls who can sell the most products. They hire girls to work in the skateshop that guys will drool over, and will sell more and order more stuff. It's run by guys."⁴¹

It is often not the female skateboarders, but the groupies who are recognized as "other" and whom some male skateboarders distinguish their masculinity in contrast to. At the same time, considering that male and female skateboarders often socialize together there is the potential for more intimate relationships to occur. Erika referred to her boyfriend, whom she met skateboarding, and who has an oppositional attitude regarding the objectification of women in the skateboard media industry. "I asked [my boyfriend], 'Why do you like me so much?' and one of the reasons was that I don't give a shit about girly things. For him, it's me, that's what he wants."⁴² I then interviewed Julie's boyfriend Martin who owns a skateboard shop and has been dating Julie for three years. Martin was not concerned that Julie often has bruises from skateboarding, and explained that, "Everyone wants to hook up someone who shares their love. I am proud. I am stoked with Julie... She's a girlfriend who skates."⁴³ Martin was also very intent on filming Julie skateboarding to acquire some footage for the local video that the girls were producing. All of my interviewees had had some kind of intimate relationship with a male skateboarder, and one couple had even married each other.

⁴¹ Erika, Personal Interview, 24 Nov. 2002.

⁴² Erika, Personal Interview, 24 Nov. 2002.

⁴³ Martin, Personal Interview, 21 Feb. 2003.

Meanwhile, the female skateboarder's situation is still problematic because to prove that she is not a groupie there is an attempt to behave like "one of the guys" which suggests that she is conforming to masculine standards of what constitutes a real skateboarder and dismisses any "feminine" qualities that she might possess. This pressure is a result of an underlying message "that males are potential skaters and females are posers"⁴⁴ unless the female skateboarder mimics her male peers. This is a complex scenario because according to Beal, "Acceptance based on being 'one of the guys' reinforces that females and femininity are not accepted."⁴⁵ But, if I am hoping to re-evaluate what is truly "feminine," I wonder where this leaves those women who are simply interested in, and have specifically chosen skateboarding as a way of realizing what might be considered "masculine" characteristics such as performing stunts and wearing comfortable, athletic clothing. This debate has actually established a division among female skateboarders, not unlike the early feminist movement, where one side is critical of those women who are emulating the guys and seem to need men to validate them as official members even though the guys never support them in the media, while the other side justifies their actions by saying that they simply prefer to skate with their male peers and want to avoid self-promotion because they just want to skateboard and not think about the industry or female solidarity.

The division is particularly focused around the "girls only" competitions established in 1997 by Patty Segovia, a skateboarder and photographer who responded to the fact that her female skateboarding friends were not getting recognition from the

⁴⁴ Beal, "The Subculture of Skateboarding," 171.

⁴⁵ Beal, "The Subculture of Skateboarding," 172.

skateboard media industry or opportunities to compete like they deserved. Segovia organized the “All Girl Skate Jam,”⁴⁶ which is a public event that encourages female skateboarders of all abilities to come together and participate in a festive competition within both the “vert” and “street” disciplines. While many girls and women embrace the competition format because it provides a safe, inclusive environment for girls to perform, others argue that the competitions do not reflect the ideal nature of skateboarding, as a subcultural activity to be performed solely in the city streets. The criticism is also directed at the way these competitions appear to be a separate, exclusive movement that might cause girls to remain isolated from the greater skateboard community, perpetuating a belief that girls are still not “real” skateboarders, but always must be distinguished by their gender. Female skateboarders argue both sides, and I think that these discussions relate to a subcultural need to distinguish oneself as “genuine,” which I explore in Chapter Three. Skateboarder and writer, Arrissia Owen responds by saying, “Yet without separate female events... only a few women will ever get any coverage by the media, which is what’s really needed to build the sport for women.”⁴⁷ The “All Girl Skate Jam” seems necessary at this stage because it encourages girls to at least give skateboarding a try, and as Williams concludes, “in the end, it’s the girls themselves who overcome these issues and divisions, simply by sticking with the sport they love best.”⁴⁸ The “All Girl Skate Jam” has also inspired similar events in other countries, such as the “Girls Skate

⁴⁶ *All Girl Skate Jam*, Jan. 2003 <<http://www.allgirlskatejam.com>>.

⁴⁷ Arrissia Owen, “No Hoochie Skater Girls: Catherine Lyons and Elska Sander,” *Wahine Online Magazine* 6 (2000) <<http://www.wahinemagazine.com/issue/rookie.html>> Jan. 2003.

⁴⁸ Denise Williams, “A Scene Within A Scene” *Concrete Wave* Vol. 1.3 (Winter 2002): 16.

Out”⁴⁹ contest in Britain, the “Gallaz Jam”⁵⁰ series in Australia and France, and “Ride Like a Girl”⁵¹ competition in Canada.

The concern is that, these girls-only competitions have acquired the dreaded “girl power” corporate label, which implies mainstream media intervention, notorious for appropriating feminist rhetoric while actually re-packaging and selling emphasized femininity. Amy was particularly critical of the “girl power” mentality, as seen in the recent magazine, *Surf Snow Skate Girl (SG)* marketed towards girls who perform boarding sports. Amy explained,

I went to get the new issue of *Thrasher* the other day, and I looked at the new issue of *SG, Girls Surf Snow Skate*, and I was pissed off. I couldn’t even buy it to laugh at it because it was fucking really disappointing to see... There was some nice photos of girls skating like Vanessa Torres and that young girl Lauren Perkins, nice photos, but as far as overall content in the entire thing, really sad. There were make-up ads, but like really girly. And I’m sure if you wanted to make a surf mag, a skate mag or a snowboard mag, it would have been about five pages long and then the other 50 pages were all fucking pink, girly, lameass ads. So, you got to filter out the fucking bullshit...⁵²

Amy obviously did not identify with this magazine that was intended to represent girls like herself because it was trying to impose and maintain a traditional ideal of femininity that includes wearing make-up and dressing “girly.” There must be a market of young women for this magazine to exist, but my peers would insist that these are the kinds of girls who are not “authentic” but rather buy into the skateboard style to be “cool,” although it quickly becomes evident through their lack of persistence that they are not intended to be actual skateboarders. The fact that this magazine resembled any other

⁴⁹ *Girls Skate Out*, June 2003 <<http://www.girlsskateout.co.uk>>.

⁵⁰ *Gallaz Jam*, July 2003 <<http://www.gallaz.com/gallazjam/index1.html>>.

⁵¹ *Ride Like a Girl*, June 2003 <<http://www.ridelikeyagirl.ca>>.

⁵² Amy, Personal Interview, 6 Dec. 2002.

generic teen magazine, full of fashion and dieting tips, and guides to romance, proves that the dominant society is attempting to co-opt and diffuse the subversive potential of the female subcultural participant, and dismiss her actions as simply a trendy activity. Kevin Young and Philip White explain that, “Resistant sport practices are often incorporated into dominant sport structures,”⁵³ so that even when women experience empowerment by physically challenging themselves, there runs a risk that either their powerful actions will be diminished by a conventional representation in the media or by them celebrating a violent or macho attitude to prove that they are capable, which only serves to contribute to the mentality that sport is defined by male participants.

There seems to be two opposing versions of the female skateboarder, the first type only skateboards with her male peers and is “one of the guys,” versus the “girl power” type who will only skateboard during a “girls-only” session at a park, and makes more of a conscious decision to conform to an image of emphasized femininity when not skateboarding. But, these are the extreme identities, and generally the female skateboarder will find herself in varying situations, at times skateboarding with only guys, then a group of girls and then a mix of both. She will also develop her own sense of identity, often incorporating masculine and feminine characteristics. Mathilde expressed that,

I think that when we don’t think about girls or boys who skateboard we just go with skateboarders who skate. When we don’t think about it, it just goes naturally... You don’t feel good with someone, it’s not because he’s a skateboarder or not, a girl or boy, you just don’t feel right with that person, so you leave them and skate with the people you like to skate with.⁵⁴

⁵³ Kevin Young and Philip White, “Sport, Physical Danger, and Injury: The Experiences of Elite Women Athletes,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 19 (1995): 46.

⁵⁴ Mathilde, Personal Interview, 6 Dec. 2002.

It also became evident in my research that most female skateboarders attribute the reason that they started to skate to an encouraging male skateboarder, and some of those young men are slowly becoming more vocal within videos and magazines, stating that they support girls who skateboard because if someone skateboards, he or she is a skateboarder regardless of gender, age, race, ability and even sexuality. I would also like to believe that since the growing population of female skateboarders now have role-models, such as Torres and Caron from the *AKA: Girl Skater* film who express how much they appreciate having each other to skate with, new female participants will realize that they do not necessarily have to look to male skateboarders for approval and validation, but rather emulate and value the opinions and performance of fellow female members.

There are many reasons why certain women decide to take up skateboarding, and it is difficult to determine exactly what type of woman is attracted to the subculture, but among my interviewees there were values and characteristics that some participants shared such as a confident personality, preference for casual or comfortable clothing, and an appreciation for active living. Marie France explained that, “I don’t like make-up and stuff, but yeah, I like to dress nice sometimes and I still like to have a touch of femininity in the way I dress, even when I go skate I might have a nice t-shirt.” Marie France then recounted the time a gang of guys approached her and Amy in the metro, and one guy asked them if they thought that they were “good-looking girls.”

Yeah, so me and Amy started laughing! And I like told him, ‘No.’ And then, the guy was just like, ‘What do you mean?’ ‘Well, you know, I’m not really working on being beautiful and [I’m] mostly working on having fun!’... I don’t really care, you know, because it’s more important to work on the inside, to be beautiful inside, than just like, on the outside.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Marie France, Personal Interview, 27 Feb. 2003.

In a discussion with Amy, she described this sense that sometimes people on the street assume that she is a guy because she is skateboarding and because of her style of dress.

I wouldn't say [my style is] unfeminine because that's not it... it comes straight down to, you skate so obviously you ain't going to be wearing the high heels or whatever. It's not practical. I'm not influenced by people or ads or clothing stores.⁵⁶

Erika also recalled the time she was skateboarding at a mini-ramp set-up within a local bar and a male spectator told her that she should be a model rather than a skateboarder, thinking that he was complimenting her appearance. Erika was dismayed and explained that, "I wish he could've said that I skated good or something,"⁵⁷ because that would have been a compliment that she could appreciate. These women present a strong sense of personal values that reflect a rejection of traditional standards of femininity and this attitude has been developed within the subcultural environment. According to Wheaton and Tomlinson, subcultures provide spaces where "female participants negotiate status and construct feminine identities as active sports participants."⁵⁸

The subcultural environment tends to be recognized as a site that promotes the formation of masculinity, particularly when the subculture is male-dominated. There are some variations among subcultural research considering that Beal theorizes around the idea that skateboarding results in an alternative masculinity because of the idealistic notion that it is completely different from sport, since it is apparently not aggressive or commercial, but based on "Cooperation, inclusion, anti-competition, and self-

⁵⁶ Amy, Personal Interview, 6 Dec. 2002.

⁵⁷ Erika, Personal Interview, 11 June. 2003.

⁵⁸ Wheaton and Tomlinson, CD-ROM Proquest, Feb. 2003.

expression...”⁵⁹. This analysis is in contrast to a more contemporary study of a comparable and closely affiliated subculture of snowboarding by Kristin L. Anderson. She suggests that, “Because snowboarding does not involve the sex-segregated teams, regulated structure, and exclusive participation policies of organized sports, male snowboarders must rely on different practices in developing a masculine image than those used in organized sports”⁶⁰ and therefore, they adopt an extreme form of masculinity found in the skateboarding subculture, which Anderson regards as an exclusively male activity. Both of these discussions are debatable considering that there are male skateboarders who are competitive and aggressive, and I would challenge Anderson’s account of skateboarding, because that is one of my goals of this thesis, to show that skateboarding is not an exclusively male subculture. Overall, the two discussions agree that these, “Unorganized and highly individualized, emerging sports may be sites for new constructions of masculinity.”⁶¹ The only problem is that hegemonic masculinity consistently attempts to negate other masculinities and assert that power, authority, aggression and technology are exclusive characteristics of the dominant male group.⁶² In contrast, Connell believes that there are actually more diverse forms of femininity in our society than masculinity. Therefore, I would like to draw attention to how these emerging sports are rather sites for new femininities, especially when it is

⁵⁹ Becky Louise Beal, “The Subculture of Skateboarding,” 179.

⁶⁰ Kristin L. Anderson, “Snowboarding: The construction of gender in an emerging sport,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 23 (Feb. 1999): 55-79, CD-ROM ProQuest, Feb. 2003.

⁶¹ Anderson, CD-ROM ProQuest, Feb. 2003.

⁶² Connell, 187.

women who are determining and validating their position within the subculture by asserting their presence and challenging socially-constructed feminine norms.

Female skateboarders experience a dynamic process of negotiation, which according to Connell, reflects how they are “living in and through contradictions about gender”⁶³ rather than simply reversing gender roles. The contradictions are then emphasized and the tensions between them become apparent. Stuart Hall understands that the post-modern subject is not experienced as a stable identity, but is often fragmented and composed of contradictory or unresolved identities.⁶⁴ In regards to the female skateboarder, some people might perceive her as having an androgynous “tough” appearance, but this image is then in conflict with recent mainstream representations, which attempt to sexualize the female participant as a “sexy skate chick.” Personally, there have been times when I have experienced pleasure as a “gender bender” when, for example, I am skating towards a group of girls on the street, knowing that they hear me and are expecting to see a teenage boy, and then seeing the look of dismay and perhaps envy, that I am not. Or other times, I find it amusing when I show up at a skateboarding social event wearing conventional feminine clothing and surprising my peers who assume that I always wear over-sized jeans and t-shirts. This experience is then in contrast to the time when I was refused entrance at a bar by a bouncer for showing up with my skateboard, wearing sporty clothing, which prompted me to sneak around the back entrance and not pay the cover charge. These experiences give me satisfaction because I feel confident when I negotiate my appearance for myself, and in control of my body.

⁶³ Connell, 283.

⁶⁴ Stuart Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” *Modernity and its Futures*, eds. Stuart Hall, David Held and Tom McGrew (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986) 276-277.

Skateboarding may seem to be a destructive activity, in terms of one's body and the bruises and injuries that occasionally result, but skateboarders also experience pleasure in their bodies. According to Beal,

The most distinguishing characteristic in skateboarding is the participant control over their physical activity, including their bodies, and not some form of elite control. The popular practice of skateboarding does not use rules, referees, coaches, or organized contests. This lack of formal structure leads to a very flexible environment where the participants not only control their physical activity, but engage in creative endeavors.⁶⁵

This flexible environment is perhaps what appeals to many young women who have decided to take up skateboarding, because it is a versatile activity and can be practiced in various locations, from one's own drive-way, the city streets, to a park designed specifically for skateboarders. There are also many creative female skateboarders, such as Erika, who combines her love of skateboarding with painting and photography, particularly of girls skateboarding. She explained that she was inspired after "meeting the girls from *Villa Villa Cola* who were filming girls who skateboard, doing their own thing, making their own movies, distributing it... all girls filming only girls and doing it, not waiting for guys to do it for them."⁶⁶ Knowing that there were other female skateboarders taking the initiative to challenge the dominant skateboard industry, through creative and alternative means, provided Erika with the confidence to pursue her own projects. Erika was also excited to learn about an exhibition (May 21 – June 11, 2003) called "Spectacle" at the Millicent Gallery in Los Angeles, featuring eleven female photographers associated with the skateboarding scene, including Lisa Whitaker, who is

⁶⁵ Beal, "The Subculture of Skateboarding," 100-101.

⁶⁶ Erika, Personal Interview, 24 Nov. 2002.

described in the program as the “most prominent female filmer in skateboarding” and is one of the founders of *Villa Villa Cola*.

The growing participation of female skateboarders in all aspects of the subculture suggests that subcultures not only instigate an “exploration of masculinity,”⁶⁷ but can develop a “new form of femininity.”⁶⁸ Femininity does not have to be determined by an external, superficial image, but rather incorporates traditional characteristics of masculinity and allows for negotiation of the two. The concept of negotiated identity, according to Hall, “is always ‘in process’, always ‘being formed’ ... Thus, rather than speaking of identity as a finished thing, we should speak of *identification*, and see it as an on-going process.”⁶⁹ And, it is obvious that female skateboarders are not always skateboarding and will negotiate their identity within different environments and social situations. It is presumptuous to hope that this new form of femininity could be on par with hegemonic masculinity, but perhaps as it becomes valued as a desirable option for women it will create a shift in social expectations and a balancing of power dynamics.

The skateboard media industry can no longer define skateboarding as a practice performed solely by young men, or justify there being a lack of female participation because of a “natural inability or as a choice of women not to skate.”⁷⁰ And, I anticipate that by interacting together in an inclusive, yet exclusive environment, the attitudes of those male skateboarders who retain conventional attitudes will change. Instead, female skateboarders will be recognized as valid members whether or not they choose to be “one

⁶⁷ Brake, ix.

⁶⁸ Brake, ix.

⁶⁹ Hall, 287.

of the guys,” rather than being judged as “posers” before being given a chance to try.

With the increase in visibility of female participation, there is evidence that the dynamics between male and female skateboarders are improving and reflect a mutual respect for each other. Robinson would approve of this environment. As she states that,

Boys need to learn by firsthand experience that the bodies of girls are real, strong, and resilient. Boys need to see girls sweat, spit, take a swig from a water bottle, and then score. Boys need to understand that the female body has as much right to public space as the male body.⁷¹

And, because female skateboarders are not passive spectators to be objectified, but are rather active subjects performing a physical activity in public spaces, the message to male participants and mainstream society is that confidence in one’s body should also be recognized as an attribute of femininity.

I would not claim that all female skateboarders are consciously working through issues of gender and identity, or claim solidarity with other skateboarders just because they are girls, but it is evident that when they are skateboarding they have rejected certain boundaries regarding traditional femininity, and occupy a space that is significant and symbolic. “When we compare these strong public acts with the message women receive from the media – your thighs are too big, your breasts are too small, your hair is too gray, your weight is too high – the contrast is extraordinary.”⁷² Robinson then explains that, “Women need to learn that their bodies are there for their pleasure, and they alone can decide what form that pleasure should take.”⁷³ Just like many of my subjects, I have

⁷⁰ Beal, “The Subculture of Skateboarding,” 164-165.

⁷¹ Robinson, 178.

⁷² Robinson, 152.

⁷³ Robinson, 152-153.

chosen skateboarding to be the form of activity that gives me pleasure and pride in my body, and I receive a sense of satisfaction by challenging standards of acceptable feminine behavior at the same time.

Susan Birrell and Nancy Theberge debate what truly constitutes resistance and transformation in sport and society, considering that resistant acts “are not transformative unless there is a change in the structure of power manifested in real lived experiences.”⁷⁴

This seems like a daunting task, but the authors also point out that,

Although we need to be aware of such debates, we should not be disempowered by them. Although troubling, they are ultimately empowering because they address and enlighten a more subtle level of power and hegemony. If we worry about whether our actions will truly matter, we will censure ourselves and take no risks...⁷⁵.

Risk-taking is central to the activity of skateboarding, and for the female skateboarder the risks she must take are not simply physical, but also symbolic risks that subvert and oppose mainstream attitudes. Femininity often appears to be fixed and naturalized within media representations, which creates a struggle for some women and even a complex or contradictory sense of identity. I would like to believe that the presence of female skateboarders suggests that women are not always consumed by an ideal, flawless feminine image, but are negotiating their identity through their strong and active bodies.

⁷⁴ Susan Birrell and Nancy Theberge, “Feminist Resistance and Transformation in Sport,” *Women and Sport: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* eds. Margaret D. Costa and Sharon R. Guthrie (Windsor: Human Kinetics, 1994) 363.

⁷⁵ Birrell and Theberge, “Feminist Resistance,” 374.

*Chapter Three: Subcultural Theory, Style, Authenticity,
and the Challenge Posed by Female Skateboarders*

The scholarly definition of a “subculture” has evolved and shifted over the past decades, but is generally recognized for the way in which a group of individuals with common interests come together and direct a challenge towards hegemonic structures. Whether or not this challenge is effective or beneficial to society is another topic for debate, considering that neo-Nazis can be deemed a subculture. As previously discussed, skateboarders form a subculture by contesting the boundaries regarding the use of “public” and city space, and performing their activities regardless of restrictions made to prevent them. Skateboarder and writer, Jeff Howe exclaims, “Skateboarding offers a way out, a path of opposition. A board is more than a slab of wood; it is a lifestyle of abdication, a silent vote for freedom without fame, glory without glamour, entertainment without consumption.”¹ According to Dick Hebdige in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, this subversive challenge is often expressed obliquely at a level of signs, through style.² Subcultural style “expresses a degree of commitment to the subculture, and it indicates membership of a specific subculture which by its very appearance disregards or attacks dominant values.”³ In this chapter, I will be focusing upon subcultural style in relation to the skateboarding subculture, how style is appropriated by the mainstream, the impact co-

¹ Jeff Howe, “Drawing Lines: A Report from the Extreme World (sic),” *To The Extreme: Alternative Sports, Inside and Out*, eds. Robert E. Rinehart and Synthia Sydnor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003) 368.

² Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1979) 17.

³ Michael Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture: The Sociology of Youth Cultures and Youth Subcultures in America, Britain and Canada* (London; Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985) 11.

optation has on notions of authenticity among skateboarders, female skateboarders in particular, and how my interviewees responded to these issues. I am also concerned with the early studies on subcultures, and how feminist scholars have attempted to resolve issues pertaining to the way female members of subcultures have been misrepresented and undervalued as simply accessories to male members. I will argue that female skateboarders often develop their own sense of style that reflects their commitment to the subculture and negotiates various definitions of authenticity, which is no longer defined solely by male skateboarders.

Hebdige uses class and ethnicity as explanatory frameworks to contextualize his examples, such as the British punk subculture, and revealed that style is a hybrid of various influences often creating a dialogue full of contradictions. Hebdige's work, although very influential, has been criticized for not addressing issues of sexuality and gender by Angela McRobbie who feels that, "Hebdige's usage of 'style' structurally excludes women."⁴ It was common among the research on subcultures, which emerged from the Chicago School of the late 1920s – 1960s, and among those academics associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in the 1970s, to highlight the activities of male members of subcultures. This practice was a result of a male bias among the early researchers of subcultural studies, who were mainly concerned with the adolescent male delinquent, so that girls seemed to be "either invisible, peripheral or stereotyped."⁵ Michael Brake, in his book *Comparative Youth Culture: The Sociology of Youth Cultures and Youth Subcultures in*

⁴ Angela McRobbie, "Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Critique," *Screen Education* 34 (Spring 1980): 43.

⁵ Brake, 163.

America, Britain and Canada, explains that, within early subcultural studies male researchers “focused on boys because of a gender identification with them, and colluded with the subjects of their studies to exclude girls from their vision.”⁶ With the emphasis on “maleness as a solution to an identity otherwise undermined by structural features,”⁷ subcultures became associated with masculinity and its development. Subcultures, like mods, skinheads and motor-bike boys “explore and celebrate masculinity, and as such eventually relegate girls to a subordinate place within them. They reflect the sexism of the outside world.”⁸ For example, Paul Willis in his work on motor-bike boys notes that, “Women were usually accompanied by a man and they did not speak anything like as much as the men. There was a small group of unattached females, but they were allowed no real dignity or identity by the men.”⁹ In response to these observations, McRobbie and Jenny Garber suggest that perhaps these girls “simply felt awkward and self-conscious about being asked questions in a situation where they did not feel particularly powerful or important, especially if they were not the steady girlfriends of the boys in question.”¹⁰ As a result of this inquiry, interest in female subcultural members, and the potential for female-dominated subcultures began to emerge.

⁶ Brake, 164.

⁷ Brake, 163.

⁸ Brake, 182.

⁹ Paul Willis, *Profane Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) 28.

¹⁰ Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, “Girls and Youth Subcultures,” *The Subcultures Reader*, eds. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (New York: Routledge, 1997) 113.

The feminist work of the 1970s and early 1980s, critiqued the “preoccupation with youth as deviant, spectacular and male”¹¹ and argued that male-dominated subcultures were not as resistant to dominant social relations, especially concerning gender, as some male academics suggested. But, these feminist studies were also problematic because the attention was upon female youth cultures that reflected and conformed to acceptable “feminine” activities, located primarily within the domestic sphere. If the girls did seek out public visibility, as in the case of teenyboppers and fans, their activities were still motivated by romanticism and the idolization of male stars. “The studies also argued that for the majority of adolescent women the main objective was to attract a boyfriend and that femininity was constructed to secure a future married life.”¹² McRobbie and Garber, in their article, “Girls and Youth Subcultures” conclude that, “Girls negotiate a different leisure space and different personal spaces from those inhabited by boys. These in turn offer them different possibilities for ‘resistance’, if indeed that is the right word to use.”¹³ According to Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine, the early feminist studies on girls’ cultures “repeated the problems existing within the research of their male counterparts,”¹⁴ since the researchers analyses conformed to stereotypical notions of female behavior, and girls who rejected these standards were not considered at all. A feminist approach to subcultural theory was influential, but these early academics tended “to restrict their inquiry to criticizing the devaluation of the

¹¹ Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine, eds. *Cool Places - Geographies of Youth Cultures* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998) 16.

¹² Skelton and Valentine, 17.

¹³ McRobbie and Garber, 120.

¹⁴ Skelton and Valentine, 18.

feminine and to examining the subordinate position of girls... They have not extended this insight to a general examination of the way youth cultures are stratified within themselves.”¹⁵ There is still an on-going concern that,

Girls are excluded from youth culture defined as public spectacle of resistance, disenfranchisement, and threat by narratives about girls’ developmental psychology and by discourses on girl as public victim, but also by popular models of girl culture. While girls occupy a wide range of social spaces and lifestyles, they are publicly understood as marginal participants in youth as spectacle, and as proper to more enclosed spaces – houses, bedrooms, and shopping centers.¹⁶

In response to this situation, it is my goal to highlight the experiences of female skateboarders who have managed to dismiss this notion of girls being “public victims,” and pursue their passion regardless of this system of marginalization. There is also a wide range of identities among female skateboarders creating a stratification, which is not necessarily defined by their relationships with male members, but rather attributes such as their level of skill, style, attitude, and commitment, creating a more complex scenario than might initially be assumed.

To establish a subculture it is understood that the members share a common language that embodies and reflects a sensibility or mood, and even though there are individual differences among members depending on their level of commitment, this commonality often revolves around style.¹⁷ The problem is, that as subcultural style becomes appropriated by the mainstream, for example, when fashion designers look to people on the street for inspiration, there is pressure to distinguish between original

¹⁵ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996) 7.

¹⁶ Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 258.

¹⁷ Hebdige, 122.

members and less-committed members or those who simply imitate and consume the style. This process of co-optation transforms and diffuses the style by making it available as a commodity. Hebdige explains, “Stripped of its unwholesome connotations, the style becomes fit for public consumption.”¹⁸ For example, the unwholesome connotation surrounding the skateboarding subculture is that skateboarders are delinquents, who rebel against society, destroy public property, and are confrontational with authority figures. The mainstream media initially condemned skateboarding for these reasons, but as Hebdige notes, after the media’s handling of the subculture’s image, “it invariably ends with the simultaneous diffusion and defusion of the subcultural style.”¹⁹ The deviant behavior of skateboarders has been re-defined by the mainstream media through, for example, the ESPN presentations of competitions like the “Extreme Games” which represent skateboarding as a sport, the marketing of professional skateboarders like Tony Hawk as celebrities, and the use of the skateboarder image in numerous commercials by companies with no association to the subculture. Howe explains,

Subcultures, by definition, are built through the creation of exclusive, esoteric meanings. These meanings are often articulated, refined, and rearticulated through cultural products, be they music or ‘zines or, in the case of skateboarding, kinetic expression. If these products offer the promise of broad aesthetic appeal, the media co-opts them and sells them to the culture at large... Consequently, the media manufactures subcultural meaning as much as it translates it, with varying degrees of commercial success. With extreme sports, it succeeded.²⁰

Therefore, after being processed by the mainstream media, the significance of the skateboarder’s use of space as a statement of defiance is practically lost and replaced by a

¹⁸ Hebdige, 130.

¹⁹ Hebdige, 93.

²⁰ Howe, 359-360.

trendy image that labels skateboarding as an “extreme” sport, which ignores the spontaneous nature of skateboard performance.

As mainstream companies lure professional skateboarders to represent them, selling a variety of products like watches, cars, mobile phones, and beverages, and with the increasing amount of images of skateboarding within the mainstream media, skateboarders have begun to feel pressure to distinguish themselves as authentic in contrast to “posers” who adopt the skateboard style but do not skateboard. There is an internal debate among the subculture to determine “official” membership, which is concerned with both mainstream adaptation and the growing popularity of known skateboard companies. There are some companies like DC shoes who have begun to actively pursue a broader youth market by advertising within mainstream media outlets like television commercials and billboards, while others have simply begun to be more recognizable due to their visibility among skateboarders. For example, professional skateboarder Jamie Thomas is sponsored by the skateboard-company Zero, and has a large following of skateboarders who want to emulate his style and attitude by purchasing Zero products. The popularity of Zero has spread, so that other young people with no affiliation to skateboarding will wear the brand with little justification beyond the fact that the logos, which often feature a white skull on black background, are perceived as “cool” because they suggest rebelliousness. Skateboarders still respect Zero and their attempt to remain exclusive to skateboarding, oblivious of this trendy phase, but concern has erupted around the use of branding, which can so easily be adopted by outsiders and diffused of meaning.

Skateboard companies are aware of the necessity to remain “authentic” among subcultural members, and according to Becky Beal and Lisa Weidman, “Some of the strategies they employ in order to be seen as authentic are self-selection, sponsorship of professional and amateur skateboarders, and appealing to skateboarders’ values through the advertisements they place in skateboard magazines.”²¹ Beal and Weidman’s article, “Authenticity in the Skateboarding World” offered some clear examples of the practices of skateboarders and the skateboarding industry, but they were primarily superficial observations because the authors seemed set on portraying and generalizing skateboarders as non-conformists who de-emphasize competition and value self-expression. My main criticism is their line of reasoning that, because male skaters often do not take female participation seriously, masculinity must be a core value to the skateboarding subculture, which is then reflected within advertisements. The authors observe that,

Of those [ads] that appeal to skaters’ desires, some depict masculine (hetero)sexuality and sexual prowess through the use of female models who possess a number of feminine characteristics, such as long hair, classically beautiful faces, bronze skin, curvaceous but slender bodies, and little in the way of clothing. The models sometimes function as trophies or adornments for fully-clothed (and usually recognizable) male skateboarders. In other cases, the female models appear only with the products being advertised (or even without the products) and function as sexual enticements to the young male readers.²²

This certainly is the case, as I have discussed earlier, but to then offer no further analysis and ignore how this is actually a very conformist, hegemonic practice, suggests a narrow-focused study. I cannot accept that masculinity is a “core value” of skateboarding simply

²¹ Becky Beal and Lisa Weidman, “Authenticity in the Skateboarding World,” *To The Extreme: Alternative Sports, Inside and Out*, eds. Robert E. Rinehart and Synthia Sydnor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003) 345-346.

²² Beal and Weidman, 349.

displayed by advertisers, when it seems more likely that companies who use sexist imagery incorporate and impose dominant formulas knowing that they can sell and make appealing their products through this base level. Their conclusion then states that to be perceived as authentic by other skaters is extremely important, “In fact, authenticity is arguably the single most important factor determining admittance into the subculture.”²³ If acceptance is so important I question how skateboarders can ever be regarded as non-conformists and therefore, can there even be such a thing as an authentic skateboarder when identity is constructed and often influenced by dominant ideals? It is too easy to make generalizations and neat conclusions about members of subcultures, certainly there are common threads of identification, but a closer, more intimate analysis is necessary rather than what is presented within Beal and Weidman’s essay.

There is actually a diverse selection of styles and values among skateboarders, male and female alike, which may depend on the skateboarders’ location, age, preference in music, obstacles of choice to skate, etc. “Where an outsider sees a ‘skater,’ someone within the subculture sees an array of signifiers, each one contributing to a highly sophisticated expression of allegiances, affinities, and individual identity.”²⁴ For example, there is an urban hip hop style among skaters who might prefer performing technical tricks while skating the city streets, versus skaters who incorporate elements from the punk scene to suggest that they are hardcore and prefer riding “bowls” or pools, or those who want to distinguish themselves for being cultured or creative and might emulate the style of professional skateboarder/artist Ed Templeton. Michael Willard

²³ Beal and Weidman, 351.

²⁴ Howe, 366.

notes how skateboard companies manufacture a certain image or icon to appeal to young skateboarders/consumers. He explains that,

Within micromarkets of the skateboarding subculture processes of distinction and style are intense... Important in this process are brand logos and the ubiquitous decals that skaters use to code and re-code their decks, cars, and skate spaces. A collage of stickers on the bottom of a board can become, in the hands of a skilled applicator, an important form of subcultural expression.²⁵

Skateboarders construct their style and exhibit their affiliations depending on various elements to send a message among insiders that they are a certain kind of skateboarder. This proves that, "Appearance is not, as postmodern theory suggests, composed of free-floating signifiers, but appears to be constructed according to socially acquired tastes and preferences."²⁶ The problem is that all of these styles are consistently being appropriated and consumed by the mainstream, and skateboard stores often resemble fashion boutiques rather than strictly selling skateboarding equipment. There is even an "anti-style" that is supposed to imply that one is rebellious, skateboarding for skateboarding's sake, but even this style can be manufactured because it is fabricated and contrived. Some skateboarders constantly innovate their style, while others simply ignore the attention and plan to continue skateboarding throughout this recent wave of popularity knowing that trends come and go, and that it is only the committed skateboarders who persevere.

We tend to vilify co-optation, but there is still the potential for resistance, which "arises from the ways in which these signifiers are *consumed* by the young, used in ways

²⁵ Michael Nevin Willard, "Seance, Trickology, Skateboarding and the Space of Youth," *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in 20th Century America*, eds. Michael Nevin Willard and Joe Austin (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 339-340.

²⁶ David Muggleton, *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style* (Oxford: Berg, 2000) 92.

that are divergent or contradictory to their manufacturers' oppressive intent."²⁷

Skateboarders, although irritated at first, do experience some pleasure when they see an advertisement that attempted to use a skateboarder to represent their product, but got the signs completely wrong since the teenager is holding a skateboard that looks like it was bought at a K-mart store and is performing outdated or staged tricks. Sarah Thornton explains that, "Mass media misunderstanding is often a goal, not just an effect, of youth's cultural pursuits."²⁸ Youth, such as skateboarders, may even emphasize certain delinquent characteristics and stereotypes, and perpetuate the media's misunderstanding to maintain their subcultural status. Although, in an advertising campaign by Nike in 1998 called, "What if all athletes were treated like skateboarders?" their commercials were quite effective in reflecting the experiences of skateboarders. The advertisements presented humorous depictions of athletes attempting to play sports like tennis or golf while being harassed by police, security guards and pedestrians in the same manner that skateboarders tend to be treated. Skateboarders generally approved of the representation, but Nike made little progress at that time in appealing to the skateboard market, considering that skateboarders tend to purchase solely from companies that are owned by skateboarders and sell products that are designed and promoted by professional skateboarders. Instead, this campaign seemed to appeal to people who wanted to adopt the skateboarder image, but had no insider experience of the subculture.

Knowledge of subcultures is often obtained through mainstream media coverage, which "may range from straight reportage and documentary accounts of the activities of a

²⁷ Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) 17.

²⁸ Thornton, 120.

particular subculture to fictional and artistic accounts, and even joking references to the particular proclivities of a subcultural group... such tenuous knowledge of a specific subculture frequently results in a caricatured and stereotypical image of the group.”²⁹ As a result of viewing such material, people who are interested in taking up skateboarding but refer solely to mainstream media representations tend to have a stereotypical appearance. Beal and Weidman note how older skateboarders were critical of newcomers who “displayed a prefabricated version of a skateboarder” and “proved their interest in skateboarding by conspicuously displaying name-brand clothing and equipment.”³⁰ This is even evident among teenage girls who are interested in skateboarding, and mimic popular culture icons like popstar Avril Lavigne, by copying her accentuated punk/skater-girl style. Therefore, distinctions can often be made between those who have insider knowledge of the subculture versus novice members who might have an exaggerated skateboard style, but sometimes these distinctions are not as obvious as one might like to believe. Instead, beyond the actual doing of skateboarding, it is often the subtle signs that become the most important in determining actual participation.

Peter Donnelly and Kevin Young conducted an interesting study on the rock-climbing subculture, specifically regarding style and authenticity. They comment on how novice rock-climbers will display their climbing identity in non-climbing settings, by wearing climbing clothes, carrying equipment, and by “turning the conversation to climbing as often as possible,”³¹ so that they might appear authentic. In fact, “what such

²⁹ Peter Donnelly and Kevin Young, “The Construction and Confirmation of Identity in Sport Subcultures,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5 (1988): 225.

³⁰ Beal and Weidman, 340.

³¹ Donnelly and Young, 229.

display actually does is indicate to climbers that one is a novice... As novices become more experienced and more secure in their identity as climbers, their need for display will decrease, and they will gradually become conscious that such behavior is not 'cool.'"³² Subcultural style, particularly for the novice, is a necessary performance because it distinguishes an individual as identifying with a certain group, separate from the mainstream culture. But, what the novice or outsider does not realize is that the signs of subcultural recognition are actually more subtle than initially perceived. For example, in the situation of the rock climbers, Young and Donnelly write, "Without quite realizing it, the individual begins to notice... the cuts and scars on an individual's hands that could only have come from climbing rock."³³ For skateboarders the subtle signs include, the scuff marks on the outside of one's shoes due to performing tricks like the "ollie" where the foot must drag across the rough "grip tape" on the surface of the board, or scars in common places like the elbows and shins, or even the way one carries their skateboard. These signs become very important, to the extent where I almost feel embarrassed when I have a new pair of shoes, because there are no signs of wear, or when I have a new board because there are no scratch marks on the bottom to prove that I am capable of performing "boardslides." My reputation as a skateboarder has been established and I feel comfortable with my identity, but when I meet novice skateboarders I sense their desperation to acquire and display their knowledge of skateboarding and gain the approval of others.

³² Donnelly and Young, 230.

³³ Donnelly and Young, 230.

In my interviews, I asked the opinion of the girls regarding those people who buy into the skateboard image but do not participate. Erika, who worked in a local skateboard shop explained that, “The majority of the people that come in to the store buy shoes and don’t even skate... I want to say ‘Just get out!’ I want to say firmly, ‘We are a skateboard shop!’”³⁴ Erika soon realized that she could not work in such an environment and quit her job. Mathilde remarked that, because she also quit her job at the same skateshop, “I feel so much better that I am out of there... I’m the one who quit... If I was still working there I wouldn’t have been skateboarding for the whole summer... It wasn’t reminding me of the joy and having fun. I’m back to the roots. I’m doing it for fun, not for fame, not for money.”³⁵ In regards to other girls who buy into skateboard brands and styles, but are not skateboarders, Amy was adamant that this was not acceptable.

It bugs the fucking hell out of me. I really don’t like it... when so much time and work goes into designing a shoe specific to skateboarding, like the Etnies Czars [shoe brand] which then come in pink, baby blue, and yellow, and the DCs that are purple, and the D3s. It’s like they manufacture that anyone can dress like they skate.³⁶

These responses reflect how strongly female skateboarders express their commitment to the actual doing of skateboarding, as well as an opinion that skateboard styles should remain something exclusive to skateboarders.

In a recent article in *Transworld* skateboarding magazine, skateboarder/writer Kevin Wilkins offers some insight regarding co-optation of skateboard style and brands. He explains that, if you skateboard, you are a skateboarder, but skateboarding is still an

³⁴ Erika, Personal Interview, 24 Nov. 2002.

³⁵ Mathilde, Personal Interview, 24 Nov. 2002.

³⁶ Amy, Personal Interview, 6 Dec. 2002.

elite activity because, “An appearance is just that – an act, an action, a process of presentation. It is not a sign that skateboarding recognizes anyone, just as it does not mean that by purchasing a predetermined product, a person is truly open to, or has any real admittance to being a genuine skater.”³⁷ Wilkins also feels that a person who buys into the skateboarder image, for example, by buying a branded beanie, is just that, a “branded beanie wearer” and nothing more. This is an interesting perspective, which I agree with, but it does not address how, as a result of co-optation there is still pressure to determine who is genuine among the subculture, and that there seems to be a hierarchy of authenticity depending on how many years you have skateboarded for, what tricks you can land, what terrain you prefer for skateboarding, and who you know.

Gaby, who is 24 years old and has been skateboarding for four years, pointed out that people often try to create an elite hierarchy. She explained,

I’m sure a lot of people would try to discredit me and say like, ‘What does she know?’ because I haven’t been here [in Montréal] as long and haven’t been skateboarding for as long... and I can’t even name a trick for shit... I’m sorry, but I still skateboard. I’m still a skateboarder. It shouldn’t matter... everybody is trying to prove that they’re ‘real’ or that they’re VIP, that they know somebody... or that they hung out with this pro... Ultimately, skateboarding is cool and it’s cool to get along because we skateboard, but we shouldn’t like each other because we’re better at skateboarding, because we’ve been skateboarding longer.³⁸

Gaby would frequently refer to her basic level of skateboarding skill, but she was still adamant that she was a skateboarder and deserved to occupy space to practice, and be respected. When I asked Amy how skateboarders are able to distinguish each other considering that so many people seem to just consume the image, she said that,

³⁷ Kevin Wilkins, “You’re Welcome,” *Transworld Skateboarding Magazine* Vol. 21.4 (April 2003): 171.

³⁸ Gaby, Personal Interview, 19 Feb. 2003.

I think that actions speak a lot louder than words. And if you can't let your style do the talking, then it might as well be your skating and your personality, or your life instead of just emulating everything that's apparently cool... You can't conceal the real. You can tell when someone head to toe is completely contrived... You can tell, whether it's skateboarding or high fashion, and it's totally made up... Lots of people aren't interested in things they can't learn overnight. And skateboarding takes fucking years... it took me a year and a half to learn how to fall.³⁹

Amy's perspective on what constitutes an official skateboarder suggests that it is only truly found through the actual doing of skateboarding and that one needs passion and determination to succeed. And, I think that this is particularly evident among female skateboarders, who may have to overcome negative attitudes from male skateboarders and the pressure by society to conform to an appropriate behavior and style for girls in contrast to boys.

In Becky Beal's research she interviewed four female skateboarders, who expressed some common sentiments regarding the relationships between male and female skateboarders. Pamela, explained that,

With my friends they look at me as just one of the guys, that was fine, now when you go skating and meet new people you pretty much have to prove yourself and they say, 'oh, a girl skater she probably can't do anything,' so you, you got to pull off a bunch of tricks and then they say, 'oh, oh, she's pretty cool.'... If you don't prove yourself you get hassled [sic].⁴⁰

Female skateboarders have always had to negotiate their position in these circumstances because they generally want to be accepted. Beal notes that even though her female participants considered themselves "one of the guys" they were still aware of being treated differently due to their gender. "Grace specifically stated that she gets lonely as a

³⁹ Amy, Personal Interview, 6 Dec. 2002.

⁴⁰ Becky Louise Beal, "The Subculture of Skateboarding: Beyond Social Resistance," Diss. University of Northern Colorado, 1992: 171.

female skater. Shelley indirectly addressed this when she said that she gets support from males, but she really gets psyched when she sees a video with a ‘girl’ skater in it. These feelings of isolation reflect a lack of complete acceptance into the subculture.”⁴¹ The problem, it seemed, was that this pressure to be accepted by male peers and conform to their standards of authenticity, hindered the progress of female skateboarders for fear of being ostracized.

Sometimes this pressure, knowing that you are being judged and must prove yourself, can be very motivating, which was the case for Louise who is 22 years old and has been skateboarding for ten years. Louise explained that, “I think it’s more of a challenge when I feel pressured that I have to do this because I’m surrounded by guys, and I don’t want guys to think that girls all suck... I feel really judged. That’s the kind of pressure that I respond really well to. Proving myself.”⁴² When Louise began skateboarding the male skateboarders at the park would throw away her skateboard, make fun of her, and cut her off, but she continued to skate in spite of them. It might have been easier for Louise if she had chosen to conform and adopt the “one of the guys” mentality, but this attitude has done little towards validating women’s right to take up space and be inspired by each other. Instead, as described in Chapter One, it has primarily been when female skateboarders recognize themselves as gendered subjects and then respond to their situation by interacting, creating visibility and promoting their activities through various mediums that positive impact has ensued.

⁴¹ Beal, “The Subculture of Skateboarding,” 174.

⁴² Louise, Personal Interview, 7 May 2003.

There are other issues beyond gender, such as sexuality that are at stake and need to be addressed in association with subcultures. Subcultures often reflect and perpetuate hegemonic values despite claims to having subversive values. Thornton explains that, “Even among youth cultures, there is a double articulation of the lowly and the feminine: disparaged *other* cultures are characterized as feminine *and* girls’ cultures are devalued as imitative and passive. Authentic culture is, by contrast, depicted in gender-free or masculine terms *and* remains the prerogative of boys.”⁴³ This is apparent within the skateboarding subculture when skateboarders, for example, are critical of those who perform “in-line rollerblading” (a modern form of roller-skating, which often utilizes the same obstacles as skateboarders and appropriates the style and jargon used by skateboarders) and use derogatory comments that imply that it is effeminate and taken up only by homosexuals. Homosexuality continues to be a taboo subject among skateboarders, so that there remains pressure to assert one’s heterosexuality in public ways, as seen in countless skateboard videos and magazine articles when a male skateboarder is seen trying and succeeding to seduce a girl or convince her to flash her breasts for the camera. In terms of girls’ cultures being devalued, I think that some female skateboarders have internalized this attitude and, as a result, mimic their male peers in attitude and appearance to gain their approval as simply a generic skateboarder without questioning this behavior.

Professional skateboarder, Jessie Van Roehoudt recalled her early memories of skateboarding and offered her perspective on style, gender and skateboarding.

I skated with all the guys. I was never skating in front of a mirror, so I never really thought, Oh, I’m different. I would kind of notice it sometimes. Like, all the guys just have to copy the fashion that’s in and they look cool, which doesn’t

⁴³ Thornton, 104-105.

work for girls. You just end up wearing baggy pants, and you look like a little boy or something. I don't want to look like that. I want to bring the tough and classy into skateboarding... Skateboarding's always been represented so that girls who are seen as being legitimate, good skaters have always sort of been looked at like, 'Oh, they're a skate girl like that. They're not really even feminine.' I think you should be able to be as feminine as you want to be and also be considered a legitimate, ripping skateboarder.⁴⁴

The attitude among female skateboarders is gradually shifting towards an acceptance of variety of even opposing styles, for example, at the 5th Annual Transworld Skateboarding Awards ceremony May 2003, the Female Vert Skater of the Year, Jen O'Brien was photographed beside the Female Street Skater, Amy Caron, and the contrast was quite apparent. "The Side Project" website displayed images of the winners where O'Brien looked as though she was ready to go to the prom, with an accentuated feminine appearance, and Caron, wearing a mesh baseball cap and "Anti-Social" t-shirt looked like she was ready to skate! And yet, both skateboarders and their styles are legitimate and valid. Female skateboarders respect Caron and O'Brien, although it is interesting that neither were recognized in the visual report of the ceremony in the September 2003 issue of *Transworld* magazine, while the male award winners were well-documented. It is almost understandable that outsiders assume that there are no girl skaters when such magazines consistently "forget" to include, for example, the results of the girls' category in a professional skateboarding competition like Slam City Jam. Regardless of this practice, I believe that for the novice female skateboarder today, their initiation has been made easier because male skateboarders no longer solely determine whether or not a girl is to be accepted since there are now prominent female skateboarders like Van Roechoudt, Caron and O'Brien to emulate, and a female community of which to feel part.

⁴⁴ Rhianon Bader, "Jessie Van Roechoudt," *SBC Skateboard* Vol 5.2 (Summer 2003): 128.

When I began skateboarding, I initially practiced alone in my basement or in an empty parking-lot because I was conscious of how male skateboarders might observe and be critical of me when I arrived at a new skatepark. I had this sense that the guys were deciding whether or not they would mock me, mildly accept my presence, or maybe attempt to be inclusive. To prove that I was cool and send a message that I was authentic, I was very strict about presenting a skateboarding style at all times, such as baggy pants, hooded sweaters, and certain popular skateboarding brands. My clothes were selected exclusively from the guys' section of a skateboard shop because the girls' section tended to display clothing that was not suitable for skateboarding, since the pants were too tight and restrictive, and the shirts had traditional feminine decoration like pink flowers and "Girl Power" statements, which I found tacky. I also avoided "girls" clothing because I was quite eager to dress like my male peers and feel part of the scene, and I had never dressed in a traditional feminine manner before, so this style was ideal for me. Paul Willis states that, "As consumers, young women have consistently broken down some of the gender categories used in shops, despite retailers' attempts to rigidly separate male and female clothes and rule out cross-gender purchasing."⁴⁵ I feel that this preference for cross-gender purchasing is not only a matter of females conforming to the pressure of a male-dominated subculture through style. For some women, it reveals a desire to contest a feminine image imposed on young women that promotes inactivity and compliance, while for others, it is simply a matter of wanting to wear practical skateboard clothing. Louise was reflecting on her style and explained how she felt that, as a kid, she looked like a boy since her hair was short, she wore a baseball cap and "fat" pants, and was

⁴⁵ Paul Willis, *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990) 91.

skating like a guy. When I asked Louise if she was concerned about not looking particularly feminine she said,

No, not really. I think it was more of a concern to my parents. They were always like, 'You should get some nice clothes'... But, I've never been a big fashion follower. And, so that's why I'm really stoked that I get clothes for free, like either from my friends or from the skateshop [as a sponsored rider]. I don't have to be all fashionable, and shit, I'm just using them because they're just like wearable clothes, especially for what I need. I'm not really too conscious about my style.⁴⁶

This response reflects McRobbie's opinions when she explains that, although women are "inscribed within structures, we are not wholly prescribed by them."⁴⁷ This practice of female skateboarders, who dismiss the pressure to act like a "real" girl by dressing however they feel and negotiating their appearance, can be viewed as a political action.

In my interviews, I was also offered another perspective when it became evident that several of the girls negotiate their style regularly and value a feminized identity.

Gaby recalled an experience similar to mine when she was beginning to skateboard.

I couldn't leave the house without wearing an Alphanumeric [brand] shirt, or I was wearing a Rookie t-shirt... dressed like a skateboarder... I couldn't leave the house without wearing skate shoes, because it's like, I would basically be saying that I wasn't a skateboarder. But, all of a sudden, I was like, 'What? Who cares?' Like, everybody I know who skateboards, knows I skateboard. If I want to dress like a girl, you know? And I'm not dissing anybody who doesn't dress like – I'm just thinking, like it shouldn't matter what you're wearing... People should be comfortable with themselves and skating for themselves.⁴⁸

Gaby explained how it was important to be comfortable with her style, but made reference to there being a distinction between dressing "like a girl" versus a skateboarder. She defended this distinction by saying that, "I don't know why we're always trying to

⁴⁶ Louise, Personal Interview, 7 May 2003.

⁴⁷ McRobbie, "Settling Accounts with Subcultures," 49.

⁴⁸ Gaby, Personal Interview, 19 Feb. 2003.

prove that we're the same as the guys? I'm proud to be different. I don't want to be a guy."⁴⁹ Aida, who is 23 years old and has been skateboarding for five years, expressed a similar sentiment. Sometimes she chooses to wear a dress or more traditional feminine attire and she told me how some people react. "People are just like, 'What?! You skateboard?!' And I'm like, 'Yeah, why do you say that?' 'I mean you're wearing a skirt?' I'm like, 'Yeah, fuck, I'm a girl!'"⁵⁰ Aida felt that it was her right to choose to negotiate between constantly displaying an obvious skateboarding style versus a traditional feminine style, and felt pride in her appearance. It almost seemed that her decision to "look like a girl" was in response to an attitude that she had to conform and "look like a guy" to be recognized as a genuine skateboarder, rather than due to feeling pressured by society that she should appear feminine. Amy concluded that, no matter what, "It really depends how you carry yourself... if I'm comfortable with what I'm wearing I carry myself well down the street."⁵¹

It seems apparent that the image of the female skateboarder cannot be generalized. Some women prefer to dress like a typical "skateboarder," which implies a more masculine style because they find the clothing comfortable, or to reflect an appearance of commitment based on male standards, or to challenge the confines of traditional femininity. This style is in contrast to other skateboarders, who might prefer wearing more feminine-enhancing clothing because they find the clothing comfortable, or to attract a boyfriend, or to retaliate against the expectation to always resemble a guy to

⁴⁹ Gaby, Personal Interview, 19 Feb. 2003.

⁵⁰ Aida, Personal Interview, 23 Feb. 2003.

⁵¹ Amy, Personal Interview, 6 Dec. 2002.

be considered “real.” What once seemed obvious, with stereotypes made about a female skateboarder’s style suggesting that she was either feminine and incompetent or mannish and capable, are no longer fixed and an interpretation of what their stylistic construction represents can only be confirmed through knowing the individual and how they personally perceive their level of commitment to the subculture.

A commitment to a subculture like skateboarding often demands the individual to transcend mainstream attitudes, including appropriate behavior for one’s age since there is an assumption that skateboarding is a pursuit for young boys. This attitude was alluded to when Willard writes, “We have all noticed, perhaps dismissed as ‘boys’ stuff,’ but definitely marveled at, the clatterous, noisy moments of skateboarding that have become a predictable part of the everyday urban landscape.”⁵² This casual suggestion naturalized skateboarding as a boys’ activity in what seemed to be a progressive, academic writing on the subject of skateboarding, space and the media. If it is normal for boys to occupy the urban landscape through such boisterous activity, it has been equally regarded as abnormal for girls to do the same because of the pressure to conform and fill one’s traditional role. To a degree, it is acceptable in society for a girl to go through a phase of rebellion, perhaps exploring a “tomboy” identity, but once she reaches a certain age there is an expectation for her to abandon such youthful performances. This “growing out’ of tomboyism tends to mean moving on to an activity that is culturally prescribed as appropriate for females,”⁵³ such as getting married and having a family. When I asked Marie Francc, as an older female skateboarder how she compared herself to women her

⁵² Willard, 333.

age who do not skateboard, she told me that, “Sometimes it makes me feel weird because when I meet women of my age it’s like there’s such a big difference ... I think skateboarding really keeps you young somehow and keeps you with an open mind... When people see me on my street with my board, you know, I can see it in their eyes that they don’t really understand how I can still do that.”⁵⁴ When I posed that same question to Erika, she explained that,

I feel like I have my own life. That’s where I feel so much different from girls my own age. When I came back to Montréal [after living in California], I was the only one in my group of friends who was still skating... I realized that it’s all an image, they have a big job, they are more serious, but deep inside they are looking for something real, for a way to express themselves... I am very confident that I am doing the right thing. That’s crazy, it goes against everything especially when living in a big city. For guys it’s easy. But when I’m in the metro... and people stare at me, like I’m weird, there’s definitely envy because you’re doing something that you like. You’re true to yourself and it’s the most precious thing in life. Skateboarding saved my life... Skateboarding is your escape from the corporate world.⁵⁵

Hebdige states that subcultural style “signals a Refusal”⁵⁶ and for Marie France and Erika skateboarding is not just an image, but a chosen way of life that refuses to conform to mainstream visions of success or normalcy. Instead, self-expression and creativity establishes their identity, which is evident in Marie France’s alternative lifestyle as a circus performer, and Erika’s photography of female skateboarders and her skateboard-inspired paintings and collage. Amy was also aware of her unconventional appearance and lifestyle, and said that,

⁵³ Barbara Cox and Shona Thompson, “Multiple Bodies: Sportswomen, Soccer and Sexuality,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 35 (2000): 11.

⁵⁴ Marie France, Personal Interview, 27 Feb. 2003.

⁵⁵ Erika, Personal Interview, 24 Nov. 2002.

⁵⁶ Hebdige, 3.

I feel different when I'm walking past people with my skateboard or I'm skating. They sort of look and realize that I'm not a boy even though I look like a boy. I don't have a problem with it. I feel unique. There's not a lot a people who wear what they want to... I didn't want to have to wear a uniform and be somebody I'm not, or buy clothes that I am not comfortable in... like being a waitress and wearing skirts. You can still be feminine - I'm kind of a crusty feminine.⁵⁷

These skateboarders may have felt different from other women whom they see on the street, in the metro, or within magazines, but it was something that they felt proud of, something to distinguish themselves as individuals who were pursuing their passion of skateboarding without compromising their own sense of femininity. And yet, I do not want to run the risk of suggesting that all female skateboarders encapsulate some idealistic notion of skateboarding by being completely non-conformist and individualistic, considering that there is such a diverse range of opinions and motives.

Female skateboarders are often influenced by and perform for each other to prove that they are "in the know" and have certain values. Willis comments that, "Since more is at stake for young women than for young men in the realm of fashion, it is not surprising that they embellish it with such rich significance. But young women do not dress for men alone. They also dress for themselves and each other. Particular clothing styles may be used by young women to inspire confidence."⁵⁸ In recognition of their specific stylistic preferences there has been several skateboard companies to emerge in recent years that cater to female skaters, like Rookie, Gallaz, Nikita, Lee Lee, and Volcom, which design practical skate clothing and skate shoes in smaller sizes. As previously discussed, Rookie Skateboards was the first female-owned skateboard company and is respected in particular by female skateboarders. To wear clothing by

⁵⁷ Amy, Personal Interview, 6 Dec. 2002.

⁵⁸ Willis, *Common Culture*, 91.

Rookie or ride one of their boards is a status symbol because it proves that you are aware that this brand has significance among female skateboarders and is “cool.” Gallaz skateboard shoes initially were such a status symbol, but when they became segregated into the girls’ shoes section and popular among groupies of male skateboarders, they lost some of their clout, although most girl skaters still respect their team of sponsored female riders. The new styles of clothing, such as the clothing that Volcom designs are also comfortable to wear when not skateboarding, as they refer to the skateboarding subculture due to their brand name, but might be more appropriate in circumstances when female skateboarders feel the need to negotiate their image, for example, to go to work or out to a bar with friends.

When professional skateboarder, Elissa Steamer was questioned about her style in her interview for *Skateboarder*, she explained that she would dress up if she planned to attend a party because, “I like to spend money on nice clothes. When a girl shops, you have to buy outfits... I don’t care now; I’m on an ‘I don’t care’ thing right now. It’s great. I just wear jeans and a V-neck shirt. I don’t care.”⁵⁹ Steamer is a role-model for many female skateboarders, and her attitude whereby, at one moment she might dress-up for a party, and then suddenly opt for a more casual appearance, is common. Steamer is expressing what appears to be an individual choice, but after personally sensing this desire or pressure to split my identity, I felt that it needed questioning. When I am skateboarding I want to reflect an attitude that I am at the skatepark to skate by wearing more practical skateboarding clothing, and then I might “dress like a girl” when I go to a bar to perhaps send a message that I can also be feminine in a traditional sense. This is a

⁵⁹ Sean Mortimer, “About a Girl,” *Skateboarder* 9 (Jan./Feb. 2000): 48.

negotiation I choose to make and receive pleasure in doing, but it also suggests that stylistic expectations still remain for female skateboarders, not necessarily based on a subcultural attitude of opposition.

Style, like identity is “formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us... Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about...”⁶⁰. This process of negotiation is a fluid one, so that both identity, as discussed in Chapter Two, and style shifts and evolves depending on what cultural systems and values influence the individual at a particular moment.

Donnelly and Young raise an interesting point regarding how one’s subcultural reputation is constantly being remade, even when membership is confirmed creating a sort of fragility, particularly among new members, geographically mobile members, and those who have made claims to various achievements.⁶¹ Therefore, the “roles and identities of members of subcultures should not be thought of as static positions and entities. They are constantly undergoing revision and change due to a variety of processes both within and outside the subculture.”⁶²

A subcultural member may revise his or her appearance to present a message of commitment and a unique appearance, but this value of difference or individuality is also present among mainstream consumers who display a diverse array of styles with their own coded and constructed meanings. And, even though subcultural participants often

⁶⁰ Stuart Hall, “The Question of Cultural Identity,” *Modernity and its Futures*, eds. Stuart Hall, David Held and Tom McGrew (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986) 277.

⁶¹ Donnelly and Young, 235.

⁶² Donnelly and Young, 237.

want to remain in contrast to and inaccessible from the dominant society, and what they perceive to be as “mainstream” values, they are not always exclusively part of their subculture, but at times interact with and function as part of the mainstream. Subcultures can even be regarded as conformist to a greater extent than the mainstream when, for example, their dress code and beliefs must be strictly adhered to. For example, skinhead members often exhibit a uniform of Doc Marten boots, jeans and bomber jacket, and follow a racist ideology. Although, there are subcultural participants who recognize their stylistic conformity, but regard it as simply a minor compromise rather than a defining factor to distinguish their independence and rebelliousness.

Lauraine Leblanc in her book *Pretty in Punk*, discusses the resistance of punk girls in a male-dominated subculture. The style of the punk movement has been appropriated in several cycles and trends by the mainstream, so that it is only by looking beyond superficial appearances, through acknowledging the individual’s experience with the subculture, that her commitment is exposed. Leblanc states that, “These girls revealed through their narratives that their reasons for joining a youth subculture involve many of the same motivations and processes as characterize the subcultural participation of their male peers.”⁶³ And among skateboarders of both sexes, these motivations might include the feeling of accomplishment when learning a new trick and the strong sense of community that often develops. While for female skateboarders specifically, even though there is an ultimate goal of encouraging more young women to participate, there is often pride in seeming unique as a girl who’s behavior is regarded as unconventional and even rebellious. Leblanc also realizes that,

⁶³ Lauraine Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk: Girls’ Gender Resistance in a Boys’ Subculture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press) 1999, 101.

the prospect of constructing stylistic, behavioral, and discursive challenges to femininity is indeed one of the factors that attracts young women to male-dominated youth subcultures such as punk. Girls who seek to create such challenges turn to male-dominated subcultures in the absence of female-generated and female-dominated subcultural alternatives.⁶⁴

This does not necessarily mean that there is a complete rejection of female-oriented subcultural activities that might, for example, be focused around private “safe” spaces like the bedroom, which McRobbie explores,⁶⁵ but when a girl has a desire to explore more physical or public subcultures, her options are limited among female-dominated subcultures. Leblanc offers a perspective more relevant to my studies than McRobbie, who argues that the relative absence of females from male-dominated subcultures is because girls are not interested in subcultural “masculine” identities since they do not address them. I feel that McRobbie’s analysis is unbalanced and leaves a void in subcultural research, while Leblanc acknowledges that girls *are* present within male subcultures and that their contributions are valid and varied.

When a female skateboarder fulfills her desire to be active through the physical performance of skateboarding the rewards are often felt internally and not always tangible or apparent. I know that when I take over a public space like Berri with my friends, or cruise past streams of traffic in a jam knowing that the drivers must acknowledge my existence, I feel powerful. These actions may not be overtly challenging society and the boundaries surrounding feminine identity, but they are statements of resistance, which Leblanc regards as key to girls’ subcultural participation. Leblanc writes, “This resistance against gender roles must be considered when we

⁶⁴ Leblanc, 142.

⁶⁵ Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture: From ‘Jackie’ to ‘Just Seventeen’* (Hampshire: MacMillan, 1991).

examine girls' deviance. While it may be true that males use subcultures to explore masculinity, it is also the case that some females use subcultures to repudiate or reconstruct femininity."⁶⁶ In my experience, female skateboarders have constructed a femininity that shows that they are confident, self-assured, independent, and opinionated. For example, Erika exclaimed, "We've got to keep skateboarding and be ourselves. Skate for ourselves. And, not worry about looking pretty for guys. Do it our way... I can skate. I'm not here to just stand around. I skate with all my heart."⁶⁷

Skateboarding can be a very individual, personal experience, but it is primarily a social activity, so that skateboarders get together after a session for parties, or go to a bar, or discuss news and gossip on internet forums. One evening, when I was socializing with my friends, as we were working on our website that will feature the group of female skateboarders from Montréal, we were discussing what to write for Amy's bio. This is a portion of our conversation:

Erika: Not to categorize her, but maybe she's like the most boyish.

Mathilde: She spits, she burps, but she's still a girl.

Natalie: She doesn't conform.

Erika: She's her own person, but to me she's like tomboy a bit.

Mathilde: She falls, she burps, she blows her nose, she does everything, but she's still a girl, she's still a nice girl, something like that.

Erika: To me, she's like more tough.

Gaby: Everything you want to say amounts to gnarly.

Natalie: She's not intimidated.

Gaby: She can hold her own.

Mathilde: I'm telling you she's a hippy. She's a hippy in the sense that she has values like a hippy does, she doesn't really care about society, as long as she's good to people, she's nice to them even though she spits everywhere on the fucking sidewalk.

Erika: She's not superficial.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Leblanc, 226.

⁶⁷ Erika, Personal Interview, 24 Nov. 2002.

⁶⁸ Group discussion, Personal Interview, 6 Nov. 2002.

While there was some discussion regarding whether or not Amy was “boyish” or “still a girl” this conversation reflected an admiration for Amy’s personality, style, and non-conformity. As I observed the group, it was evident that the approval of one’s female peers is just as important if not more so, than the acceptance of male peers, and it seemed that if a girl presents confidence in her appearance she is respected and admired. And yet, it was only because we were all skateboarders that we could recognize the personal choices made to suggest individuality and commitment to the subculture, which again seems contradictory. But, what I want to emphasize is that at least these decisions are being directed and influenced by the women involved rather than solely conforming to a male standard of authenticity.

Instead of being contained and isolated within male-dominated subcultures, Brake imagined that girls would eventually become more visible and have an active relationship towards subcultural production, and this is occurring within the skateboarding subculture. Skateboarding is unique as a subculture in the way that its members have consistently documented their performance, style, and evolution through photography and film, and in my own community, local videos are a very popular form of representation. One of my interviewees, Mathilde took a particular interest in learning how to film skateboarding in action, editing her footage through her computer, and incorporating music and special effects. Initially, she had not planned on making an all-girls skateboard video, but what resulted after accumulating more and more footage of her friends skateboarding was a fifteen minute video called *Boy* (Mathilde Pigeon, JoBlo Productions, 2003) and the first of its kind in Canada. The film displayed ten of the local female skateboarders, including four feature parts, and a montage of the remaining girls performing tricks. The title was

also an ironic choice, considering that there is a reputable all-male skateboarding company called *Girl*. Mathilde explained that she started filming because she observed her male friends working on a video, and imagined herself in the same position.

I was thinking, 'If I get a camera maybe I could just film a little bit and make like a two minute film.' Two minutes! That was like the biggest thing I was imagining. I just started filming and filming. I filmed the whole summer... I got all the girls, everyone who was skating this summer. I went everywhere, everyday.⁶⁹

The process of filming was a rewarding experience for Mathilde, as she gained a new motivation to continue skateboarding, and the process of editing the footage was also exciting because it often involved several of the girls gathering at her home to offer their suggestions. Mathilde explained that, "I'm making this video not to sell it, just so people can see it, be proud and see us doing it... This is something we all did together this summer to show that we're out there skating... This video is going to be the truth, some evidence!"⁷⁰ I felt that this video was also important because the girls realized that they do not have to wait for the guys to represent them, but can do it for themselves. At the video's completion, Mathilde commented, "Man, it's fucking done... it's all of us together. If you are not there, if Margaux is not there, if Louise is not there, I can't do anything. Everyone was like, 'Yeah sure, film it. Shy at first, but you know we just made it all together.'⁷¹ Mathilde was particularly proud of the fact that there was no sponsors or funding involved with the video, but rather that it was a collaborative effort and displayed how much fun the girls have while skateboarding.

⁶⁹ Mathilde, Personal Interview, 2 Feb. 2003.

⁷⁰ Mathilde, Personal Interview, 24 Nov. 2002.

⁷¹ Mathilde, Personal Interview, 2 Feb. 2003.

Unfortunately, there were individuals who felt excluded from the project because they had no footage to contribute and suspected that they were not “cool” or good enough to be represented. Whether or not this was a conscious decision by Mathilde or a matter of the individuals not being available for filming sessions, will not be addressed, but again it points to how the approval of one’s peers is of key concern to subcultural members. This situation also reflects the impact that cultural producers have, on both the scale of major skateboarding companies and small-scale independent projects, in determining who will be represented and who will not be. And yet, it should also be noted that leaders like Mathilde are needed to take the initiative to complete a project like making a video and that sometimes they cannot accommodate everyone, which simply means that more people need to get involved and contribute their opinions if they are not completely satisfied.

Despite these initial concerns, the *Boy* video was completed in March 2003 and a video premiere was organized at a local bar downtown, where a crowd of approximately two hundred skateboarders, friends and family, came to support the production. The response and the demand for copies of the video have been encouraging, with female and male skateboarders from Australia, Britain, U.S.A., and across Canada, including rural towns in Québec, requesting copies. The video was of interest to Lisa Whitaker, a filmer/skateboarder in California who was enthusiastic to meet women like Mathilde who shared similar interests, and is now selling the video through her website, “The Side Project.” The video was reviewed in the first edition of the local Montréal skateboard magazine *Exposé*, and Denise Williams plans to publish a review in her next edition of *Push Skateboard Magazine*. The editors of *Exposé* also supported the group by including

female content within two pages each issue called the “Chick Out” section, displaying photos, female-oriented skateboard stories and interviews by the girls in Montréal. The positive reaction to the video prompted Mathilde to develop a website called “Skirtboarders,”⁷² which includes photos, artwork and stories of the girls who participated in the first video and a preview of the new video in process.

Through cultural production and their active participation within a male-dominated subculture, female skateboarders challenge past subcultural research. Even their negotiation of style and authenticity positions these women as valid members of the subculture, rather than simply accessories to male participants. Perhaps McRobbie would be skeptical of this analysis considering that she writes, “The attractions of a subculture - its fluidity, the shifts in the minutiae of its styles, the details of its combative bricolage - are offset by an unchanging and exploitative view of women.”⁷³ I am also aware and critical of the exploitative representation of women in the skateboarding subculture, but it is evident that the growing visible presence of female skateboarders is having a positive impact on the subculture. I equate this gradual change to the way in which female skateboarders are taking control of their representation and challenging the attitude that male members will always determine what is genuine about the subculture. This debate surrounding authenticity is also suspect considering that subcultures often demand conformity to a certain dress code while those in the mainstream might seek out unique styles with more flexibility. Although, when it comes to standards of feminine performance, both dominant society and the skateboarding subculture have been clear that women should conform to passive behavior and avoid aggressive activities. In

⁷² *Skirtboarders*, July 2003 <<http://www.skirtboarders.com>>.

response, female skateboarders are innovating their subculture's ideals and values, and often promote a confident sense of identity. This process of change may be complex and even contradictory at times, but ultimately, female skateboarders are participating within the subculture with more determination than ever before.

⁷³ McRobbie, "Settling Accounts with Subcultures," 44.

Chapter Four: Stories of Subcultural Experience and Negotiation of Space

By Female Skateboarders

In the Introduction I discussed how important it was for me to represent my peers, to reveal the diversity of the group, and acknowledge my own voice among the dialogue. This chapter is dedicated in particular to offering more insight into the identities of the speakers. I will still ground the responses in regards to discussions of subcultural space, but the focus is upon the women's experiences as skateboarders. The interview results were often personal accounts that reflected a variety of backgrounds and opinions. Qualitative research methodology presents risks when the interviewer is personally invested in the research, though I feel that I made an effort not to exploit the trust of my friends and to maintain some critical distance. I could have solely incorporated the interviews of the leading sponsored female skateboarders already published, but I felt that it was important to draw attention to my local skateboard scene and the core group of female skateboarders who are not necessarily validated due to a high level of skill, but whose everyday experiences are just as valuable. I will expand upon my relationship to the individual girls, and then organize their responses around common themes, such as their experiences as novice skateboarders, their influences and motivations, and finally return to issues of space and inclusion.

In the summer of 2002, due to a variety of random events, a group of young women who shared a passion for skateboarding came together in Montréal and formed what might be considered a "community" or even an emerging subculture, although one that still co-exists with male participants. I had been living in the city for almost a year,

but had been initially distracted by a long-distance relationship, and my first winter was spent primarily indoors. By the time the summer arrived I was motivated to skateboard and develop my friendships I had begun to make. I had known Louise because she had come to Vancouver, where I had been doing my undergraduate work, to compete in the “Slam City Jam” competitions for several consecutive summers. Louise was my first connection to the Montréal skateboard scene, and she subsequently introduced me to Gaby and Mathilde. Gaby had also moved to Montréal to attend University several years earlier and pursue her music career, and we discovered that we had several mutual friends in common from our past. Mathilde was eager to practice speaking English with me, and had just begun experimenting with her video-camera, so she would often try to arrange girls-only filming sessions. Aida was a good friend of Mathilde’s and I began to see her more often, especially when she started working at a local skateshop downtown. Aida then introduced me to Nathalie one summer evening, while having a beer at the popular bar Foufones Electrique, often frequented by skateboarders. Nathalie had not tried skateboarding at that time, but was also going through a frustrating break-up, which I related to, and a friendship ensued.

Amy unexpectedly arrived in July from the Kootenays in British Columbia, and was quickly introduced to the group after meeting Marie-France skateboarding in the streets, whom we all knew and admired. Marie-France is the oldest of the girls, and her story of determination includes enduring a troubled childhood, a battle with drugs and alcohol in her teen years, and the on-going care of a disabled child as a single mom. She still maintains a passion for life that includes skateboarding, juggling, acrobatics, circus performance, and learning new languages. I had met Brigitte, who began skateboarding

the earliest of the group, when she organized all-girls skateboard sessions at a private indoor skatepark north of the city, which I attended. I met Julie, an energetic Quebecoise when she invited me along with Mathilde and Louise for a skateboard roadtrip to Toronto and Oakville. Finally, Erika returned to Montréal after escaping an abusive relationship with a professional skateboarder while living in California for five years. I had met Erika in Vancouver when she attended the “Slam City Jam” event to watch her ex-boyfriend compete and came in contact with my friends while skateboarding. Her creative energy and love of skateboarding has helped her overcome an oppressive situation, and now fuels her desire to produce a zine and exhibit her artwork and photographs. The girls had been generally aware of each other, and friendships had begun to be formed, but it was not until that summer did we attempt to all skate and hang out together, rather than remain individual female skaters among our respective group of male peers. This group formation seemed significant and exciting for all of us, and one of my goals for this research was to document and position our experience within a broader context, and also to encourage the on-going development of the community.

All of the girls responded enthusiastically when I proposed doing interviews with them, and the results were often surprising and enlightening. I would initiate the conversation by asking them how they began skateboarding and why. Brigitte explained that she saw a skateboard in a store window when she was twelve and thought it looked like fun, but that her father thought it was too dangerous even though she was already a roller-skater.

So, I negotiated with him for six months, he made me sign a contract, and the contract stated that I would wear my helmet and my wrist guards every time... I

began cruising to school. But guess what I did? I brought my backpack and once I was down my street and around the corner, I took off my helmet and pads!¹

Brigitte continued to skate with some boys in her neighborhood until she turned sixteen and took a break for several years because she had a part-time job and, “There were issues with my father because he felt it was socially unacceptable to be a skateboarder. He said that ‘Oh, you have to grow up.’”² It was only after she took up snowboarding and became more independent that Brigitte decided to begin skateboarding again. Marie France also started skateboarding early on, but had to take a break for different reasons. “What happened was, I started skateboarding nine years ago and I skated for a summer, but then my daughter needed so much care because she’s paralyzed, she has cerebral palsy... She needed a lot of attention daily, 12 hours a day, so it kind of put a hold on it. And then, like, three summers ago I decided that it was time for me to get back on my board.”³ Marie France’s attitude reflects her determination to pursue her interests despite a situation that might seem restrictive, and also points to another area of research, that of the experiences of skateboarders who are mothers, which I would one day like to explore.

Louise was also very self-motivated when it came to learning how to skateboard and eventually competed at an international level. She told me that,

Nobody was encouraging, some guys tried to not let me skateboard. I just became addicted to it... my guy friends would skateboard a lot, and I would always want to try their skateboards. But, they kept on telling me, ‘Skateboarding is not for girls!’ So, I just said, ‘Fuck it!’ and one day I went out and bought myself a skateboard. I started learning ollies in my street all by myself, and then, when it would rain I would just go in my garage and ollie on flatground.⁴

¹ Brigitte, Personal Interview, 8 Feb. 2003.

² Brigitte, Personal Interview, 8 Feb. 2003.

³ Marie France, Personal Interview, 27 Feb. 2003.

⁴ Louise, Personal Interview, 7 May 2003.

Louise was not deterred by the young men who attempted to intimidate her and preserve the skatepark as a male domain. According to Cressida Miles, “Subcultural space as such does not guarantee freedom from constraint, but for some it provides a site of reflection and negotiation.”⁵ And in Louise’s case, she was able to reflect upon her experiences, and how it influenced her identity.

I think skateboarding made me meet so many different people, now I’m able to deal with any situation. You have some fucking idiots, then you have some people who are very intelligent, smart, creative, interesting, they’re businessmen, some are artistic, well-educated, some are just well-rounded, some are alcoholics and stink, some are on fucking heroin, some others are strict vegans, some are on coke, some do yoga before they go skateboarding because it relaxes them and makes them focused ... You can’t generalize skateboarders.⁶

Louise was able to discern what qualities in people that she values, and has created a balanced lifestyle for herself, as she is known for her remarkable abilities to pursue her academic studies as well as her passion for skateboarding, competitions, and travel.

Louise’s story is in contrast to Mathilde’s early experiences, which was very positive because she learned to skate in her rural hometown with her brother and their friends, and was then welcomed into the skateboard community of Montréal without hesitation. Julie also had a brother to skate with, but she explained that she was not happy and would prefer to skateboard alone until she began to go to the Boucherville skatepark on a regular basis, where she became accepted as part of the group. Amy was actually introduced to skateboarding by a female friend who gave her a skateboard. “My

⁵ Cressida Miles, “A Gendered Sense of Place,” *The Clubcultures Reader*, ed. Steve Redhead (Oxford; Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997) 73.

⁶ Louise, Personal Interview, 7 May 2003.

friend was like, 'Hey, you should come skate at the park.' I was really scared, but finally one day I went, it was fun and I didn't stop going back."⁷

Going to a skateboard park can often be a very intimidating experience and one's first time takes some courage, especially as a lone female. Sometimes the group of guys can be encouraging and friendly, while at other times they can be distant and rude. Gaby recalled going to the indoor skatepark called the "Tazmahal," where she felt extremely intimidated and nervous because it seemed like the guys assumed that she was only there to find a boyfriend.

It was like everyone turned and looked at me, all the guys, and they're all watching me while I do something because you're a girl and they want to see if you can really skate... Nobody really approached me, the guys who would approach me, it would just seem like they would hit on me... I don't know, it was weird because I just wanted to go there and skateboard... it was so intimidating, my knees were shaking so hard I couldn't do anything ... It was a weird experience, it felt like nobody really wanted to let me into the 'inner circle' and I skated there for the entire winter.⁸

Meanwhile, Aida who began skateboarding at the Tazmahal around the same time was oblivious to these attitudes and stated that she never had problems except that, there was "one person that told me one day, 'Get out of my way!' But I said, 'Fuck, the Tazmahal is not yours!'"⁹ Aida acknowledged that perhaps some people stared at her, "But, I wasn't even looking over, I was just like, 'I want to skateboard, I need a break.'"¹⁰ Gaby actually expressed admiration for Aida because, "She goes all the time regardless of who is there, if it's men or women. She wouldn't even dream of letting anyone make her feel

⁷ Amy, Personal Interview, 2 Feb. 2003.

⁸ Gaby, Personal Interview, 19 Feb. 2003.

⁹ Aida, Personal Interview, 23 Feb. 2003.

¹⁰ Aida, Personal Interview, 23 Feb. 2003.

intimidated about it.”¹¹ When Marie France began going to a popular skatespot downtown called “Peace Park” she explained that,

You know, I was just showing up, they were looking at me, and they were skating, but I didn’t feel that anybody really rejected me at all. A lot of the problem was in my head, you know? Me not being comfy, not knowing how to skateboard a lot... [Eventually] more and more people were saying ‘hi’ to me, even helping me with tricks, and it was okay.¹²

Aida, Gaby, and Marie France’s experiences are all valid, but it seems that it is often up to the individual and whether or not she will let external elements or attitudes hinder her participation. As Miles explains, “the subject nature of experience within any given subculture changes according to the input and actions of those who participate,”¹³ and if those participants are women who make a decision to benefit from their subcultural experience, the results can have a positive impact on the subculture as a whole.

Most of the women I interviewed also recognized and appreciated their interactions with certain male skateboarders at some point in their skateboarding career. Marie France referred fondly to various individuals, such as the guys who worked at the skateshop called “Spin” because they gave her skateboard equipment and made her feel welcome by acknowledging her at skatespots and offering advice. Aida also referred to “Spin” where she works, and how much she valued the encouragement of her male co-workers. She remembered when after work Felix invited her to the “Big O”, a famous Montréal skate spot, which includes a steep concrete mini-ramp/full pipe located near the Olympic Stadium, and she had been nervous. Felix exclaimed, “You’re able to skate

¹¹ Gaby, Personal Interview, 19 Feb. 2003.

¹² Marie France, Personal Interview, 27 Feb. 2003.

¹³ Miles, 76.

that! What are you saying? I'm going to bring you every time we go skate that.”¹⁴ Erika recalled a similar situation when she began working at the skateshop “En Equilibre.” “I was snowboarding, and I never thought I could skateboard, I had never seen another girl in my life. I was working with all these guys who skateboard after work, and one day I asked to come along to Boucherville park and I learned there with them. One of the guys hooked me up with old trucks, old wheels, an old board.”¹⁵

Nathalie, who is just beginning to skateboard, acknowledged her friend Philippe for offering encouragement especially when she announced her newfound interest.

He's been my good friend for a long time. He's been skateboarding since I've known him. And he's always been really, really supportive of me trying. He would always be there to slip that board under my feet. He's amazing, and the first thing he said when I told him, he was like, 'Oh my God! You just told the wrong person! I'm going to call you each day this summer and you're definitely going skateboarding!'¹⁶

Gaby gives credit to her friend Bernard for giving her support when she felt uncomfortable showing up at skatespots alone. “Bernard was just stoked that I was a chick and skateboarded. Everyday after work he'd be like, 'Are you going to come skate?' And I would be telling him, 'I'm really not very good.' Like I didn't want him to expect too much out of me... Bernard would go out skateboarding with me... And I felt better about it.”¹⁷ Gaby also noticed how it often seemed that it was the guys who were most secure and confident in their ability that gave her a chance and did not dismiss or

¹⁴ Aida, Personal Interview, 23 Feb. 2003.

¹⁵ Erika, Personal Interview, 24 Nov. 2002.

¹⁶ Nathalie. Personal Interview, 22 Feb. 2003.

¹⁷ Gaby, Personal Interview, 19 Feb. 2003.

judge her. She described meeting a new friend named Joe, who is a reputable skateboarder in Montréal.

When I first met him, I was talking to him and he was saying, ‘Yeah, I saw you on the mini ramp, that’s really cool!’ And I was like, ‘Yeah, I felt kinda bad because all these guys were skating and I just feel like I’m taking up their time and stuff.’ And Joe was like, ‘Who cares man? You’re a body, I’m a body, you’re entitled to your space!’ And he’s a really good skateboarder, you know what I mean? He’s also somebody who could like, go around pretending like he fucking rules, he owns the place and everything, and meanwhile, he’s telling me, who can’t even ollie, that I’m entitled to the same amount of space and the same amount of time as he is. And it’s true!¹⁸

The comment that Joe made was particularly perceptive and exceptional, but it reveals that there are some young men who do take into consideration issues of space and equality, which are put into practice when young women position themselves in such situations that demand a re-evaluation of constructed norms.

While some female skateboarders need validation and encouragement from male skateboarders, especially when they are beginning and have no female peers, others are fortunate to find women who share their passion and create a network of support. In many of the interviews, the girls described when they encountered another female skateboarder and how friendships were developed. Marie France recalled meeting a very talented skateboarder named Alison who was visiting the city for the summer.

She was really good... and that’s what really told me, ‘Okay, you can skate, no matter if you’re a girl you can skate’... It was nice to see her skate. She has a nice style, she has a good attitude, she’s funny, and she did this video part and I thought that was pretty cool... she ‘heel-flipped’ six stairs, and ‘switch ollies’ up the block!¹⁹

¹⁸ Gaby, Personal Interview, 19 Feb. 2003.

¹⁹ Marie France, Personal Interview, 27 Feb. 2003.

Marie France has since become respected in her own right, as expressed by Nathalie who exclaimed, “She’s gone through so much and came out so much better... The fact that she’s into so many things right now...it’s amazing how she can balance out everything, having a little girl and still be an amazing, wise person, and I love her a lot!”²⁰ Gaby also appreciated and admired a fellow female skateboarder. “I did my own thing, but Louise was really cool, she was genuinely welcoming to me. She would call me up every time she was going skateboarding somewhere, always encouraged me. You know, she was way better than I was, and I was just learning... I owe a lot to her.”²¹

As the group came together during the past summer, Julie remarked that, “I love it, now that all the girls have met and we are a team. It’s so good, man. We’re always together. I really like it... I know that I can call you and know that you are going to come or if you can’t come I got a list of ten persons to call, you know, other girls.”²² Julie then recalled meeting her friend Anne-Sophie at a local competition and how they began skating the mini-ramp together. They both shared an interest in competitions and ended up traveling together to the 2002 “All Girls Skate Jam” in New York City placing 2nd and 3rd in the amateur street division. Several of the girls enjoy participating in competitions, but Mathilde noted that, “nobody between us is in competition with each other, you know what I mean, we’re all different, we all have a different style, a different type of trick and we all do our own thing. And, we still do it together.”²³ Among the fourteen women that make up this core group, it is apparent that our level of skills, ages, and backgrounds are

²⁰ Nathalie, Personal Interview, 22 Feb. 2003.

²¹ Gaby, Personal Interview, 19 Feb. 2003.

²² Julie, Personal Interview, 21 Feb. 2003.

²³ Mathilde, Personal Interview, 2 Feb. 2003.

quite diverse; some of the girls come from broken homes, some come from very intimate families, others have strict religious upbringings, and are from lower to middle-upper classes. But, with a mutual appreciation for skateboarding these differences are often set aside, especially when an all-girls skateboard session is organized, such as a recent photo shoot for *Exposé* magazine of all the girls cruising down Mont Royal hill. This event was also important because there had been personality conflicts that threatened to break up this newly formed group, creating cliques and allegiances, but it was understood that every girl deserved to be there, and as a result of this exclusive session past tensions were resolved or forgotten. By just having a common interest in skateboarding and being female does not guarantee that everyone will be close friends, but overall, there is an understanding that when we are skateboarding all else is insignificant.

Skateboarding becomes this shared experience that seems to override conflicts, rumors, and gossip that do develop, especially when one is apart of an intimate community like the skateboarding scene in Montréal. Sometimes there is a lack of privacy, which can be an issue for individual skateboarders who may prefer to use skateboarding as a solitary act and shun the social activities that are often associated with the subculture. Each skateboarder will negotiate his or her time and make choices based on personal preferences. There are days when I have no patience for calling up my friends to try and organize a group session and will just hop on my skateboard and practice alone, and sometimes I will avoid social functions like a video premiere or “skater night” at a bar because I want to give myself a break from constantly talking about skateboarding. And yet, I also rely on my friends for renewing my motivation to skateboard, showing me new spots and potential tricks to learn, as well as support

regarding personal life matters beyond skateboarding. Nathalie was particularly inspired to start skateboarding due to the positive group dynamics she experienced when hanging out with all the girls and watching the video we produced.

It's kind of like a family... I thought that was great and the fact that just one thing brings you really together and that's skateboarding... I've always felt weird hanging out with skateboarders because I felt that I didn't belong... I couldn't interact at the same level as they would. And it was super weird sometimes. And, I don't know, that already changed some when I started hanging out with you guys, because I had no bad feelings whatsoever about anything, you didn't question my being there with you guys at all. You guys didn't make me feel in any way excluded...you guys don't diss me, or call me a 'poser'!²⁴

For many observers the skateboarding subculture is exclusive, considering the subtle codes to determine authenticity, but there is always the potential for inclusion especially when one establishes his or her own group of friends who are able to recognize each other's commitment to skateboarding, and disregard what anyone else thinks or says.

Each female skateboarder that I interviewed expressed how much they appreciate skateboarding with a group of female friends. Gaby remarked that, "it is good that all of a sudden there's a crew of girls... It's great when there's like seven of us cruising down the street and people look and they do a double take, and there's seven girls... We're a mob!"²⁵ In a similar situation, Robinson explains that,

Many people will wonder how a run through the streets of a city can be construed as a political act – and especially how it can be connected with sexuality. But women who run are engaging in a public act of freedom. They are also claiming a place in public space – space that has not always been open to women... It is an incredibly powerful statement when women take to the streets in their running shoes. They sweat, they spit, they allow their bodies to function freely and their faces to grimace and laugh.²⁶

²⁴ Nathalie, Personal Interview, 22 Feb. 2003.

²⁵ Gaby, Personal Interview, 23 Feb. 2003.

²⁶ Laura Robinson, *Black Tights: Women, Sport and Sexuality* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers, Ltd., 2002) 151-152.



Figure 2 Female skateboarders posing downtown Montréal.



Figure 3 Female skateboarders from Montréal gathering for dinner.

The thrill of occupying the city streets with a group of your friends is also enhanced by the way in which such an activity like skateboarding seems oppositional for a young woman. When you are part of gang, you do not feel inhibited or apologetic for your actions, you can laugh at the taxi driver pumping his fist in frustration when we take up a whole lane on the street, or the pedestrian who shakes her head disapprovingly at our “unruly” behavior, or the couple who was trying to peacefully enjoy their expensive meal on a restaurant patio, as we go clattering by! It is still quite exceptional to see a group of female skateboarders take to the streets, but when it does happen the energy and sense of celebration is so strong. Even though I value my solitary skateboarding moments, I will always remember the first time I got together with a group of girls in Vancouver to cruise the city at night, and the desire to reproduce that experience motivates me to continue.

In her essay regarding the early British punk scene and the gendering of subcultural space, Miles explains that,

Historically, the separation of private and public has positioned women in less public spaces, belonging to the home and within the tight rein of an ideological corset of feminine attributes... Young women are measured for their likeness or rather their positioning to mothers, whores, mistresses, spinsters and lesbians. Subcultures are not magically protected from these constructs, yet for some women in punk there was a place to be angry and to celebrate the illicit and clandestine – for some a means of seeing critically into the mirror and of challenging the reflection.²⁷

Several of my interviewees recounted acts of resistance that they performed, which, like the female punks of Miles’ study, were expressions of frustration and celebration.

Erika recalled the afternoon, while working at a skateshop, when she gathered together all of the videos that included token parts of girls skateboarding, such as Elissa Steamer’s features, and played them on the TV monitor displayed in the shop. “It was so funny to

²⁷ Miles, 71.

see the guys' reactions... all the guys don't say anything, they don't even say 'cool', they don't know what to say. I don't think any girl has done that before in that store. They're used to saying 'Oh check him out' and instead it's 'Hey check her out!'"²⁸

Erika was probably the most conscious, or at least articulate skateboarder that I interviewed regarding feminist issues and values, which she had the confidence to act out within the skateboard "session" environment. As Borden explains,

The session format involves a group of skaters standing at the pool entrance or half-pipe platform, waiting for their run... there is a rough understanding that each skater gets one run in turn; jumping this sequence is sometimes referred to as 'snaking'. Further, it is the ground on which the waiting skaters stand that constitutes the primary social space of the audience; although other non-skaters may look on, it is skaters-only who tend to occupy the entrance point/platform, and it is they who shout encouragement, astonishment and abuse at the skater performing... The session is thus a kind of informal competition among individuals, but is also a collective activity.²⁹

What is not understood in this description is how intense and intimidating the session can be, particularly as a lone female. For years I refused to learn to skateboard in a mini-ramp or bowl due to the fact that I was not interested in lining-up, attempting a trick and then feeling like a spectacle on a stage because I was a girl. I have since overcome these fears due to participating in girls-only sessions, and now enjoy the energy of the ramp session no matter whom I am skateboarding with, and ignore the spectators. Erika's specialty is skating the mini-ramp and bowl, and she described one session in particular, when she was in California with a group of male friends. The session was suddenly interrupted by two cameramen who barged onto the ramp and set-up a scene where a

²⁸ Erika, Personal Interview, 24 Nov. 2002.

²⁹ Iain Borden, *Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the Body* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2001) 124.

young woman wearing a bikini, barefoot, holds a skateboard and pretends to “drop-in” to the ramp. Erika was insulted and explained,

I’m not a person that’s just like, ‘whatever’... Therefore, the only thing to do was to ‘drop-in’ in front of her because I was so mad... I said, ‘I think we’re skating here! I think we were just fucking skating! We were having a session!’ And I dropped in, and I ‘kickturn’ right next to her foot, like I scared her... And I kept skating.³⁰

Erika was concerned that her group of male peers would ostracize her as a result of this daring move, especially since some of the guys thought the model was cute and were worried that she could have been hurt, but several of the guys approached her afterwards and applauded her actions. Erika was adamant that people should be more questioning of the world, and has decided to create a zine called *Armpit*, to be a vehicle for presenting her ideas. “I need to inspire younger girls... I have this rage inside of me, justice is screaming inside of me. It’s so loud right now... There’s so much to be done.”³¹ The first edition was released in July 2003, and included contributions from seven of the girls, ranging from photographs, artwork, stories, poetry, book reviews, opinion pieces and interviews, which also served to strengthen the group since everyone could appreciate each other’s talents, beyond simply skateboarding.

In another act of resistance, Marie France described the time when she was ticketed for skateboarding downtown. As mentioned in previous chapters, skateboarding in the city streets often provokes authority figures like the police, who attempt to regulate and prevent this unruly activity by distributing fines based on city bylaws. Marie France

³⁰ Erika, Personal Interview, 11 June 2003.

³¹ Erika, Telephone message, 14 May 2003.



Figure 4 Cover of the premiere edition of *Armpit* zine.

had been skating at Peace Park when she was suddenly surrounded by four police cruisers. She was approached by a policeman who aggressively kicked her board, demanded to see her identification, and then gave her a ticket for \$142 for making noise. Marie France sensed that the policeman wanted to beat her up, so she decided to hold her protest until she was in front of a court audience. At court, Marie France prepared her defense, presented herself professionally and shamed the officer.

I went up to the judge and said how this guy treated me, he treated me like a criminal, and I did a good talk there. And you know, even at the end, the judge said to me, 'You know, you're not a criminal because you got a ticket.' The judge was actually really nice. He [reduced] my ticket to \$100, and it was hilarious!³²

Even though receiving a ticket in the first place was frustrating and humiliating, Marie France was not going to be intimidated by the attitude she received from the policeman, and instead maintained a sense of dignity. This story reflects Marie France's individual strength, but it is also a common situation that many skateboarders relate to. The policing of public space is a daily reality and challenge for skateboarders, and in part unites the subculture because the members distinguish themselves as the protagonists in contrast to the police. Even when compromises are made neither group can be entirely subdued. For example, a concrete skatepark was recently built in Montréal on Rosemont Street, and police officers monitor and circulate the skatepark in their cruisers to offer a reminder of their constant surveillance, and in response, skateboarders continue to skate illegally in the city streets at their preferred spots.

Just like the female punks in Miles' article, who "played a part in the consumption and production of space and contributed to the creation of 'representational

³² Marie France, Personal Interview, 27 Feb. 2003.

spaces,”³³ female skateboarders are clearly inhabiting the same spaces as their male peers, as well as sharing similar experiences, but on different terms. These terms are flexible because there are women who prefer to be a member of a group of skateboarders, while others forge ahead as individuals. As Aida explained, “That’s the thing, I love to do my own thing, you know? I don’t need everyone around me, and I don’t need that everyone knows that I skateboard, like I do my own thing.”³⁴ Even if Aida is oblivious to those around her, I am confident that her presence at a skateboard spot, as an independent female skater, makes an impression on those who observe her. As described earlier, Aida is capable of losing herself within the moment, focusing upon the positive energy of her skateboarding experience, ignoring any negativity that might surround her. At one point she was listing the different places she enjoys skateboarding and remarked how, at Jarry park “the sunsets over there are beautiful!” For Aida, the skateboarding setting can also be a sensory-sensual space, that incorporates one’s natural surroundings as well as the various skateboarding obstacles or cityscape, which is discussed by Henri Lefebvre in his key text, *The Production of Space*.³⁵ Lefebvre has received criticism from academics such as Judith DeSena, who is concerned with “how women create and alter space in the public sphere”³⁶ and felt that there was a void in academic discussion on women and urban space considering that their lives are greatly affected by their interaction with the city. DeSena’s concerns are also articulated by Edward Soja when he writes, “We must

³³ Miles, 67.

³⁴ Aida, Personal Interview, 23 Feb. 2003.

³⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 210.

³⁶ Judith N. DeSena, “Gendered Space and Women’s Community Work,” *Research in Urban Sociology* 5 (2000): 276.

be insistently aware of how space can be made to hide consequences from us, how relations of power and discipline are inscribed in the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human ideologies become filled with politics and ideology.”³⁷ Soja recognizes that people are not simply affected by space but experience unseen consequences, which are often produced through hegemonic means and institutions to preserve power among the dominant class.

Women are not mentioned explicitly in Lefebvre’s writings, but I cannot dismiss his research, and instead, prefer to rework his ideas from a contemporary, feminist perspective. Lefebvre states that,

Social space thus remains the space of society, of social life. Man does not live by words alone; all ‘subjects’ are situated in a space in which they must either recognize themselves or lose themselves, a space which they may both enjoy and modify. In order to accede to this space, individuals (children, adolescents) who are, paradoxically, already within it, must pass tests. This has the effect of setting up reserved spaces, such as places of initiation, within social space.³⁸

This passage discerns how the individual interacts within space, but I am concerned that women would be grouped with children and adolescents, considering that they often have to endure tests and rituals of initiation within spaces reserved for men, such as the subcultural space, before they feel at ease. And yet, as I have discussed, female skateboarders are modifying and innovating these rituals of initiation, and transforming space through their active participation rather than remaining passive spectators. Female skateboarders are therefore creating their own social identity by passing through these boundary spaces, such as the mini-ramp session or the city streets, and experiencing

³⁷ Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989) 6.

³⁸ Lefebvre, 35.

pleasure from them. Skateboarders are animated bodies, whose principle, according to Lefebvre, “is neither visible nor legible as such, nor is it the object of any discourse, for it reproduces itself within those who *use* the space in question, within their lived experience. Of that experience the tourist, the passive spectator, can grasp but a pale shadow.”³⁹ This reminds me of Nathalie’s story of going to a skate spot to watch her boyfriend and feeling awkward because he could go anywhere, and she felt that people were questioning why she was there. When she made the decision to learn how to skateboard, she exclaimed, “I love it without even knowing exactly, fully what it is. I think I’m really, really going to love it once I start getting into it!”⁴⁰

Skateboarders have a different perspective of their urban environment than the average pedestrian and utilize the city landscape in a unique fashion, so that spatial production becomes a “dynamic intersection of body, board and terrain.”⁴¹ In Michel de Certeau’s essay “Walking in the City,” he describes the “ordinary practitioners of the city”⁴² who make use of unseen spaces in the city streets and compose a spatial story. The “walkers” are oriented around names of places and streets that direct their path.

Linking acts and footsteps, opening meanings and directions, these words operate in the name of an emptying-out and wearing-away of their primary role. They become liberated spaces that can be occupied... People are put in motion by the remaining relics of meaning, and sometimes by their waste products, the inverted remainders of great ambitions.⁴³

³⁹ Lefebvre, 137.

⁴⁰ Nathalie, Personal Interview, 22 Feb. 2003.

⁴¹ Borden, 96.

⁴² Michel de Certeau, “Walking in the City,” *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1993) 153.

⁴³ Certeau, 159.

Skateboarders often liberate and transform spaces by making use of discarded materials such as this spring, when we found and positioned a sheet of metal against a snowbank at Berri, and would launch ourselves off the make-shift kicker, over the snowpile, to the area we had shovelled clear. Willard remarks that, “What skaters see and others miss are the ways that each skater uses the same space differently... The skaters’ ability to see alternate possibilities in common places provides them with a knowledge of urban space that they can circulate among other skaters for the formation of subcultural community.”⁴⁴ This knowledge of one’s city is a source of pride among skateboarders, and a new system of naming is formed. In Montréal, when skateboarders refer to “Peace,” “City Hall”, “Berri”, “Jarry”, “Gesù”, or “the Big O” there is an instant and mutual recollection of the obstacles available for one’s skateboarding pleasure. For someone else these names might draw up images of official monuments or tourist sites. As Borden explains, “Thus rather than the ideologically frontal or monumental, skateboarders usually prefer the lack of meaning and symbolism of everyday spaces – the space of the street.”⁴⁵ Even in everyday spaces one can produce a “body of legends”⁴⁶ and among skateboarders this involves recalling past skateboard sessions, the friends you were with, the tricks that were performed, and the injuries sustained.

The act of recollection among skateboarders creates a fiction where perhaps the only visible reminder of the experience is the residue of wax applied to a ledge to make it

⁴⁴ Michael Nevin Willard, “Seance, Tricknology, Skateboarding and the Space of Youth,” *Generations of Youth: Youth Cultures and History in 20th Century America*, eds. Michael Nevin Willard and Joe Austin (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 335.

⁴⁵ Borden, 188.

⁴⁶ Certeau, 160.



Figure 5 "Pop shuvit" landed at Gesù.

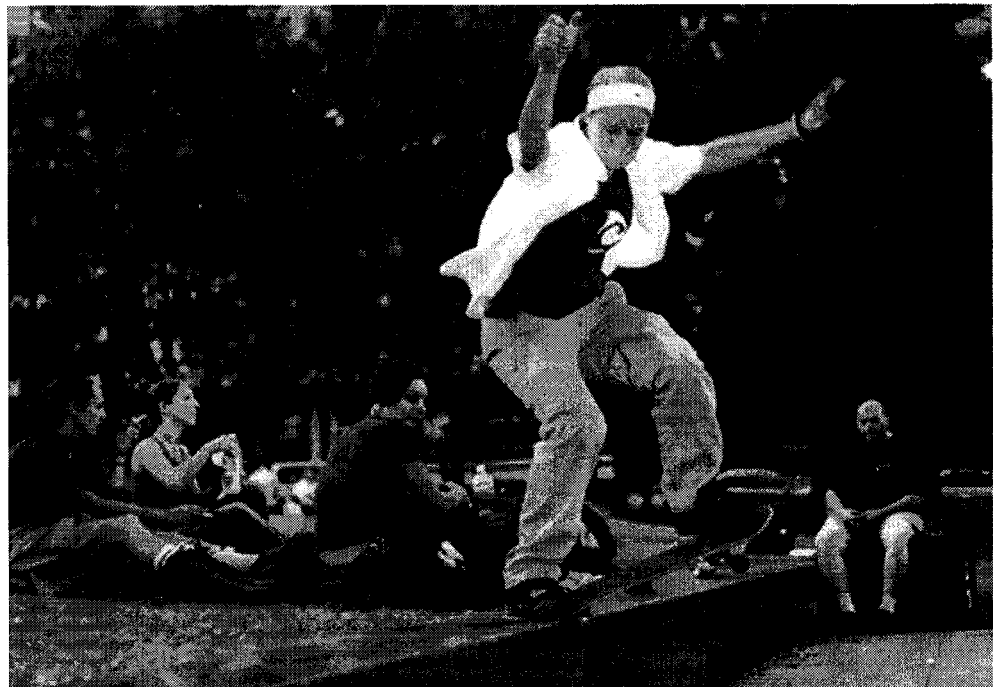


Figure 6 "Crooked grind" performed at Berri.

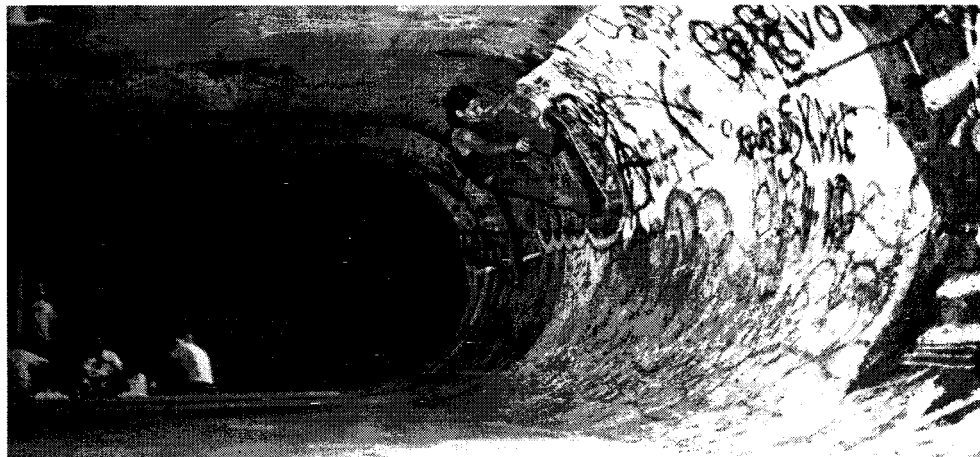


Figure 7 Pumping the transition in the Big O.

slippery for “grinding” or a trace of paint on a handrail due to the execution of a “boardslide”. Willard notes that, “For skateboarders space is something temporary, but their use of the media ‘constructs’ larger spatial scales that help to overcome such a transient and transitory existence.”⁴⁷ For female skateboarders the use of media has also been crucial in creating visibility, space, and a body of legends in spite of socio-spatial boundaries that have attempted to forbid them access, and a subculture that has been reluctant to acknowledge their existence. Jennifer Hargreaves explains that, “The evidence of history shows how women’s sports are ‘lived cultures’ which embody tensions, conflict and contradictions... Women’s sports are invested with meanings which are imposed on women, but which women also create for themselves.”⁴⁸ And what women athletes and subcultural members can create is a collection of stories to reveal the absences in history of their participation, and combat the repetitive practice whereby male experiences are considered representative of the whole. Therefore, even among subcultural spaces it is important to recognize the relations of power among members, and who is benefiting from or taking for granted, for example, media representations of the activity. When imbalances are discovered one can respond by constructing a more accurate depiction that reveals how subcultures are contextualized within and co-dependent upon dominant society.

⁴⁷ Willard, 331.

⁴⁸ Jennifer Hargreaves, *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994) 91

Conclusion

Most skateboarders perform a kind of resistance in response to restrictions imposed on them to prevent their use of city space, but for female skateboarders they must also overcome socially-constructed barriers positioned by the dominant culture to maintain distinctions between the sexes. To pursue and excel at skateboarding women need to disregard these boundaries particularly when they are expected to remain passive, compliant and subordinate, which are attributes associated with emphasized femininity that often work to restrict their movements and their identity. The problem is that these limitations are structured and legitimated by hegemonic ideology promoted through social institutions like schools, family, culture and media. Quoting Greg Malszecki, Robinson points out how, “From infancy on, playing is not an activity shared equally between the sexes... the space open to boys, and which they use freely, is considerably greater and subject to fewer borders or limitations.”¹ The “playing” space for skateboarders, such as the skatepark and the city streets, has not always been an inclusive environment for women either, considering that it is constructed as a male domain and its contradictions have been masked by a seemingly oppositional appearance.

As I have discussed, there have been a variety of attempts to dismiss and diminish female skateboarder’s activities. Their accomplishments have been ignored by the subculture’s media industry in preference for misogynist images of women within skateboarding advertisements. And, among mainstream representations of skateboarding the activities of male members have been focused upon, either as delinquents or as heroes

¹ Laura Robinson, *Black Tights: Women, Sport and Sexuality* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers, Ltd., 2002) 95-96.

or both, and when female participants are recognized their identity is often sexualized and positioned in relation to their male peers. When skateboarding is portrayed as an aggressive, masculine activity, the sexuality and motives for women who choose to skateboard are questioned and criticized. Despite these preventative methods, female skateboarders continue to thrive and by sharing their opinions amongst each other it becomes obvious that there are discrepancies within both mainstream and popular skateboarding media productions of the subculture's history. Even in academic circles there is concern that, "We do not learn about the women as individuals, nor about the functioning of their peer group,"² but rather they are regarded as simply extensions of men. To address this concern in my own study, I conducted interviews and traced a history of female skateboarders and their participation leading up to the current situation where there are a diverse range of identities and styles that are often complex, shifting and contradictory. A process of negotiation occurs when a female skateboarder constructs her style, and by recognizing this construction I also found that the notion of subcultural authenticity was problematic because it often demands conformity to a set of ideals, which may or may not allow for flexibility particularly regarding gender and the appreciation of female participants as being influential.

Fortunately, what I notice through my interactions with female skateboarders is that there is resistance to the "fixed" male identity of skateboarding and that women manage to express their commitment to the subculture through a variety of means. Some women choose to simply skateboard and others act as cultural producers by making zines

² Judith N. DeSena, "Gendered Space and Women's Community Work," *Research in Urban Sociology* 5 (2000): 279.

and websites. Further, there is a creative movement with women taking photographs and producing artwork inspired by and oriented towards women who skate, and in my case, there are others attempt to make the experiences of these women heard by writing letters, articles and essays. Just as Hebdige writes in reference to studying subcultures, I am not making any claims that female skateboarders and their activities contain a “repository of ‘Truth’”³ with revolutionary potential because there are contradictions among the group, their cultural productions are generally small-scale, and I do not want to romanticize the scene as “radically transformative.”⁴ I will also admit that it is rare to hear a female skateboarder state that she chose to pursue skateboarding so that she could dispel stereotypes imposed upon her by society or to combat the sexism of the skateboard industry. This is not unusual because, according to Brake, “Most youth subcultures, unless they have an articulated political element, are not in any simple sense oppositional. They may be rebellious; they may celebrate and dramatise specific styles and values, but their rebellion seldom reaches an articulated opposition.”⁵ Female skateboarders, like male skateboarders generally take up the activity because it looks fun and it has a certain “cool” prestige associated with it. This “cool” factor is often a result of media representations of the subculture. The media industry is therefore,

fundamental to processes of popular distinction because media consumption is a primary leisure activity and because they are leading disseminators of culture. Media are so involved in the circuits of contemporary culture that they could be conceived of as being part of the material conditions of social groups, in a way not unlike access to education... some media legitimate while others popularize,

³ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1979) 138.

⁴ Cressida Miles, “A Gendered Sense of Place,” *The Clubcultures Reader*, ed. Steve Redhead (Oxford; Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997) 70.

⁵ Michael Brake, *Comparative Youth Culture: The Sociology of Youth Cultures and Youth Subcultures in America, Britain and Canada* (London; Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985) 7.

some preserve the esoteric while others are seen to 'sell out'. As subjects of discussion and sources of information, media are deliberate and accidental determinants of cultural hierarchy.⁶

The media certainly allots value on particular cultural groups or movements at different moments in time, but I will also argue that, whether or not the mainstream media represents what members feel is an accurate depiction of their subculture or even completely ignores them does not mean that the subculture cannot organize and expand. Members do not always need to see their reflection mirrored back from an outside perspective, considering that there have been several phases in the past when skateboarding has fallen out of the media's spotlight and the industry has struggled to exist. Despite these fluctuating waves of popularity, skateboarders still continue to skate and it appears that they are here to stay. And this also goes for women, because even though they might not be commonly depicted by the media as skateboarders, does not mean that they should dismiss the idea of pursuing such an activity.

Skateboarders may not rely upon an outside representation to be validated, but according to Lefebvre, "groups, classes or fractions of classes cannot constitute themselves, or recognize one another, as 'subjects' unless they generate (or produce) a space."⁷ Female skateboarders have become subjects by acknowledging their unique position, by interacting with each other at skatespots downtown, skateboard parks, skateshops, the city streets and the metro, and then extending their points of connection and visibility through mediated and virtual spaces. What often results from this networking is a gesture of defiance, especially when these women enjoy their strong and

⁶ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996) 163-164.

⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 416.

active bodies in public and male-dominated spaces, and make their voices heard through cultural productions. This exhibition reflects what Shauna Pomerantz considers to be female skateboarders implicit status as third wave feminists in action, because they are proving themselves to be powerful, political and part of a process of change.⁸

In a comparable situation, Hargreaves writes, “The idea of power being invested in the female sporting body is understood most clearly in those modes of sport seen as being suited to males which have been taken up by women as new forms of identity.”⁹ The new forms of identity among female skateboarders are significant and varied because there still remains a complex process of negotiation for each individual involved. Skateboarders come from diverse backgrounds and it is remarkable that this activity can bring such a variety of people together, who all identify with skateboarding in their own manner. Jeff Howe, in his personalized article on skateboarding versus the contrived definition of “extreme” sport, explains how every day he wakes up a skateboarder. “It’s not just a thing I do, but something I am. An attitude and outlook enforced by experience and memory and the track history of scars that cross my knees.”¹⁰ I relate to this statement because even when it is raining outside or I am preoccupied at work, there will be a point in my day when I am consumed with thinking about skateboarding. Perhaps I am anticipating my next session, planning a roadtrip, or flipping through a magazine. Even when I am walking down a noisy city street I find that I am tuned into

⁸ Shauna Pomerantz, “Grinding the Concrete (Third) Wave,” *Sexing the Political: A Journal of Third Wave Feminists on Sexuality* 2 (2002): n. pag Online ProQuest, Oct. 2002.

⁹ Jennifer Hargreaves, *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994) 168.

¹⁰ Jeff Howe, “Drawing Lines: A Report from the Extreme World (sic),” *To The Extreme: Alternative Sports, Inside and Out*, eds. Robert E. Rinehart and Synthia Sydnor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003) 356.

skateboarding and can quickly distinguish the sound of skateboarding in the distance before he or she comes into view. This research has accentuated my experience because I realize that skateboarding is always there for me and I am always a skateboarder since it gives me a sense of satisfaction and distinction. Skateboarders often express a deep connection to their subcultural identity and the women I interviewed were no exception. Marie France exclaimed, "I love skateboarding, and even if it takes me twenty years to get where I want, I don't care, I have all the time in front of me. I'll still be skating when I'm seventy. For me it doesn't matter, I'm having fun and I enjoy it. There's no other reason why I want to skate."¹¹ Erika focused upon the feeling and energy of skateboarding. "Skateboarding a bowl makes me feel free, feel alive, like I'm doing something that's worth doing. Alive - that's how it is."¹² And, Amy concluded, "Skateboarding is a form of self-expression... You need the passion, because if you're heart is not in it then it shows. You're doing it half-hearted, unless you want to. You can do whatever you want."¹³

Subcultures exist because they provide an opportunity to explore one's identity, an outlet for self-expression and an intimate community. According to Sarah Thornton, "Subcultural ideology implicitly gives alternative interpretations and values to young people's, particularly young men's, subordinate status; it re-interprets the social world."¹⁴ But, if subcultural ideology is truly re-interpreting the social world this emphasis on young men's subordinate status must be questioned. Young men still operate more freely

¹¹ Marie France, Personal Interview, 27 Feb. 2003

¹² Erika, Personal Interview, 24 Nov. 2002.

¹³ Amy, Personal Interview, 6 Dec. 2002.

¹⁴ Thornton, 5.

and with a greater degree of privilege in our society while, as Driscoll points out, “Private spaces and domestic cultures, rather than public space and subcultural styles understood as self-expression, seem to structure girls’ lives.”¹⁵ This is the reality for most young women, but I still think that there needs to be an adjustment in subcultural theory to allow room for more consideration of female subcultural members and the significance of their experiences. It was my intention to produce a study that might encourage other academics to embark upon subcultural analyses that either focus upon and make visible female activity or, at least, acknowledge issues of gender in a more complex, thought-provoking manner rather than simply dismissing these matters as trivial or inconsequential.

As a contribution within the skateboarding subculture, I suspect that my research will be received with mixed results. To an extent, I am nervous because I have tried to address the concerns of female skateboarders before within a skateboarding internet forum with varying success. The “Island Productions”¹⁶ internet forum was established by male skateboarders in Montréal to pose questions, provide gossip and debate opinions generally related to skateboarding and the local scene. I joined the forum to announce the production of the girls’ skateboard video *Boy*, and to get the opinions of the participants, whether or not they were interested in seeing it. Several guys responded, but with typical derogatory remarks, inquiring about the size of the girls’ breasts and asking who was a slut among the group. I was initially discouraged and there was an incident when I felt that there was a double standard regarding censorship of particular posts that I made,

¹⁵ Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 260.

¹⁶ *Island Productions*, Jan. 2003 <<http://www.islandproductions.org>>.

which challenged sexist comments by using the same type of sarcastic, sexually-explicit humour expressed by male members. Eventually, as more female skateboarders made their presence felt on the forum, the space no longer remained male-oriented and several male skateboarders began to voice their encouragement regarding our activities and productions as well.

I am aware that some skateboarders will not appreciate my study for making issues of gender a key concern, perhaps suggesting that my observations are inaccurate, and yet I am reassured when I read an article like, “A Scene Within a Scene” by Denise Williams. Williams had been arguing with a young man who insisted that there were no gender divisions in skateboarding, in comparison to the harassment that he had experienced as teenager while skateboarding. This prompted Williams to write,

Skateboarding has such a distinct cultural aspect, that individual communities have very unique personalities... We can't make sweeping generalizations about what it's like to grow up skateboarding... It's ironic that, in the same way, acceptance of female skateboarders varies by community – but it's a scene within a scene. We can't say that all girls have to vault enormous sexist hurdles to follow their love of skating, because some places are a lot more progressive than that. And yet, I still get emails from female readers that go like this: ‘I'm 14 and I like to skateboard, but the boys beat me up. What do you do when the boys beat you up?’ The point is, no particular community has the last word on the girl's experience. The truth remains, however, that the divisions are out there, whether they exist in your scene or not. And they're discouraging girls who want to skate.¹⁷

To know that there are like-minded women who skateboard and articulate their opinions gives me confidence that my contribution cannot be dismissed as a narrow representation but is rather a valid portrayal of a particular scene and group of young women.

It has been important for me to question my choices and responses made within this thesis, especially when I am prompted by other female skateboarders. Professional

¹⁷ Denise Williams, “A Scene Within A Scene” *Concrete Wave* Vol. 1.3 (Winter 2002): 15.

skateboarder, Jessie Van Roechoudt made an insightful comment in her interview for *SBC Skateboard* magazine when she said, “It sounds like a stupid semantics argument to say ‘girl skater,’ but having to put girl in front of it sort of means that you’re saying it’s something other than a skater. Otherwise you’d just say ‘skater.’”¹⁸ I felt that it was necessary to distinguish between a female and a male skateboarder considering that there are imbalances and inequities still at play, but I hope that someday this reference to gender will be considered redundant and unnecessary. In the meantime, despite the conflicting representations of women in popular skateboard media productions and even the divisions among female participants, I feel that such a physically demanding, and yet highly social subculture, offers something rewarding for everyone involved.

Throughout the interview, research and writing process I aimed to reflect my passion for skateboarding and the vitality and energy associated with this dynamic subculture, as well as assert the female experience as both complex and significant. My research methodology coincided with Liesbet van Zoonen’s statement that, “Qualitative techniques of data gathering such as in-depth interviewing, participant observation and a range of other, less traditional and ad hoc data collection procedures are most adequate to gain insight into the meanings of everyday life.”¹⁹ To portray the skateboarding subculture I incorporated a range of sources such as skateboard magazines, videos, websites and zines, as well as the few academic writings on skateboarding. As an insider I also included anecdotes and stories from my own personal history. It was important to expand this representation of skateboarding through the perspective of everyday

¹⁸ Rhianon Bader, “Jessie Van Roechoudt,” *SBC Skateboard* Vol 5.2 (Summer 2003): 128.

¹⁹ Liesbet van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies* (London: Sage Publications, 1994) 135.

participants who are my peers by conducting interviews and observing how the group evolved over a two-year period. The interviews were casual, as I had already built a rapport with the women based on our shared appreciation for skateboarding, and the results often shaped, directed and challenged my analysis. This approach reflects what van Zoonen explains when she writes,

It is the researcher's task to reconstruct those meanings and understand the processes behind them and the processes that arise from them. It is precisely this element which makes an interpretative research design such a 'natural' choice for feminist scholars who have among their many aims to save women's experiences from oblivion by making their lives visible and their voices heard. What feminist research has to add to interpretative research strategies is a notion of power, an acknowledgement of the structural inequalities involved in and coming out of the process of making meaning.²⁰

And, as I have emphasized, female skateboarders have had to persevere due to a subordinate status among the subculture, which reflected attitudes established by the dominant culture that de-valued women's cultural activities.

As a feminist researcher, it was necessary to highlight the diversity of female voices among the group and make connections where similar experiences were shared.

According to Willis,

the culturally effective way for sports women (and others) to counter their role as the unwilling victims in a larger legitimation of belief about the nature of sexes is to offer much more strongly their own version of sports reality which undercuts altogether the issues of male supremacy and the standards which measure it.²¹

By offering their own version of subcultural reality and by accumulating visual evidence,

²⁰ Van Zoonen, 134.

²¹ Paul Willis, "Women in Sport and Ideology," *Sport, Culture and Ideology*, ed. Jennifer Hargreaves (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986) 134.

female skateboarders counter exclusive practices that tend to generalize and dismiss women's experiences. Their dialogue reflects a desire to occupy public spaces for their own enjoyment and to develop their subcultural identity in reference to and in resistance to dominant ideology. And, among the community of women that I skateboard with in Montréal it seems that what I have described is only the beginning of something very special, with momentum continuing to build as new projects, such as the "Armpit" zine, articles for *Exposé* magazine, a roadtrip to the all-girls skateboard contest, and another video are being organized. It is also exciting to know that we have an audience of women beyond our city limits and country borders who are enthusiastic to interact and celebrate our accomplishments with us.

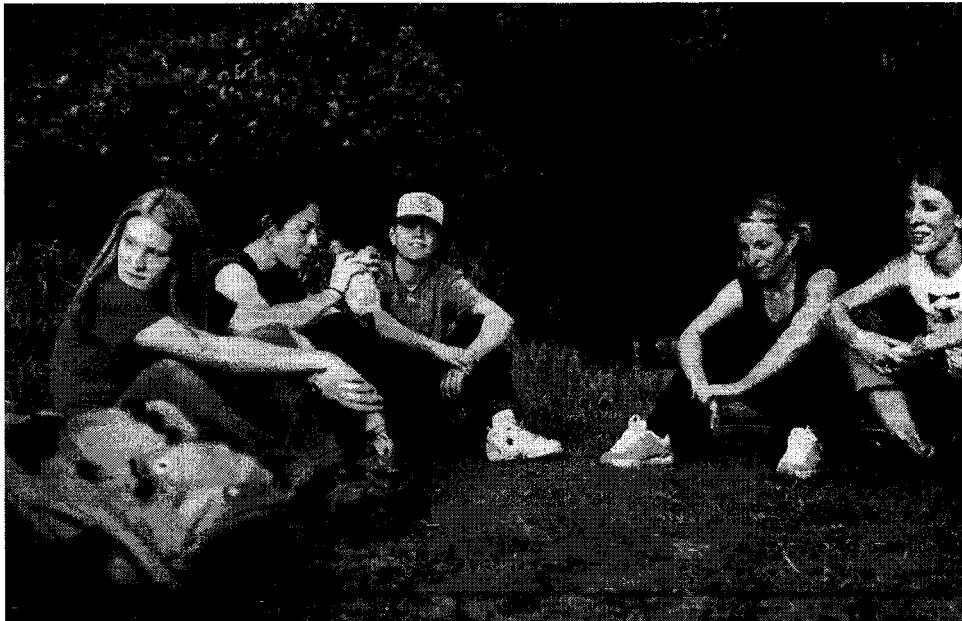


Figure 8 Relaxing at the top of Mont Royal before a downhill session.

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Appendix – Individual Data on Interviewees

| Name | Interview Dates | Age | Years Skateboarding | First Language |
|-----------------------|---|------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Aida | 23 Feb. 2003 | 23 | 5 | French |
| Amy | 6 Dec. 2002 2 Feb. 2003 | 21 | 3 | English |
| Brigitte | 8 Feb. 2003 | 29 | 7 | French |
| Erika* | 24 Nov. 2002 14 May 2003** 11 June 2003 | 28 | 8 | French |
| Gaby* | 19 Feb. 2003 23 Feb. 2003 | 24 | 4 | English |
| Julie (and Martin) | 21 Feb. 2003 | 23 | 7 | French |
| Louise | 7 May 2003 | 22 | 10 | French |
| Marie-France | 27 Feb. 2003 | 33 | 3 | French |
| Mathilde* | 24 Nov. 2002 6 Dec. 2002 2 Feb. 2003 | 22 | 6 | French |
| Nathalie | 22 Feb. 2003 | 18 | 0 | French/English |
| Natalie* | Interviewer | 25 | 9 | English |

* Participated in a Group Discussion on 6 Nov. 2002.

** Phone Message left for Interviewer.

Glossary: Skateboard Terminology

Betty: A derogatory term that was applied to female skateboarders to suggest that they were tomboys and unattractive, but which has now been re-appropriated.

Boardslide: A trick performed, with many variations, which involves the skateboarder sliding across or down handrails or barriers, making contact with the area of the board in between the trucks.

Bowl: A fabricated skateboard obstacle that resembles a pool, but is made of wood.

Coping: The lip at the edge of a pool, or the metal-piping that lines the top of a ramp.

Crooked grind: A type of “grind” where the skateboarder’s back is facing the obstacle, and she is sliding her front trucks at an angle against the obstacle’s edge.

Drop-in: A basic motion that occurs when the skateboarder is on top of an obstacle, such as a ramp or bowl, and rests the tail of her board against the coping, her back foot is positioned on the tail and then she applies pressure with her leading foot to the front of the board, shifts her weight forward and rolls downwards.

Grind: A trick performed when the metal trucks make contact with the edge of obstacles such as, ledges, handrails, coping.

Grip-tape: The sand-paper type material that is applied to the top of a skateboard, which allows the skateboarder to have better grip while skateboarding.

50-50: A certain kind of “grind” that is achieved when both the front and back trucks are balanced and sliding along the edge of an obstacle.

Frontside: This term is used to define a trick, where the skateboarder is facing the obstacle, such as a “frontside boardslide,” as opposed to “backside.”

Full-pipe: Essentially a massive pipe, such as a sewer, where skateboarders use the transition to create momentum back and forth, and perform tricks.

Heelflip: A variation of the “ollie” where the skateboarder kicks her leading foot forwards, nicking the board with her heel, so that it flips in the air before landing.

Kickflip: Similar to the “heelflip” except the front foot kicks and flips the board in the opposite direction.

Kickturn: A turn-motion that is necessary on a bank or transition, where the front trucks are lifted and the skateboarder swings herself around 180 degrees, to go back down the obstacle.

Mini-ramp: A miniature version of the “vert-ramp” also called a “half-pipe.”

Nose-wheelie: A balancing maneuver performed while moving where the skateboarder shifts her foot and weight onto the nose (top end) of the board, and lifts the back end, so that only the front wheels are in contact with the street.

Nose-slide: When a skateboarder propels the nose of the board up and onto the edge of an obstacle like a ledge, handrail or coping, and positions her weight on the front end and slides, as opposed to a “tail-slide” when the back end of the board is in contact with the obstacle.

Ollie: A basic trick that involves manipulating the board, by popping the tail against the ground with the back foot, the front foot is brought upwards and drags forwards, then both feet are pulled upwards, so that the skateboard appears to stick to one’s feet when jumping.

Poser: A label for someone who dresses like a skateboarder, but does not skateboard.

Rock to Fakie: A maneuver performed when the skateboarder rolls their front trucks over the coping or lip, but before rolling backwards (or “fakie”) she lifts her wheels and avoids getting “hung up” (stuck on the coping), which results in a fall.

Session: A general term used to describe the practice of skateboarding with friends.

Shuvit: When the skateboarder pushes her board with her feet so that it rotates flat 180 degrees, and when an ollie is incorporated it is called a “pop shuvit.”

Street: In a contest, a course of obstacles often found in the city streets, like ledges, handrails and banks, but often more exaggerated and stylized, are set up in a confined area for the competitors to perform a series of tricks in an allotted amount of time, where judges determine who exhibited the most skill.

Switch: A term used to define a trick when the skateboarder has learned to switch her feet position, so that it is no longer her comfortable, natural footing, but the opposite.

360: As a flatground trick, the skateboarder puts weight on the back end and back wheels, lifts her front wheels, and spins her body and board 360 degrees.

Trucks: The metal axles that are fixed to the bottom of the skateboard and the wheels are bolted onto them.

Vert-ramp (or “vert”): Adapted from the full-pipe, a large wooden obstacle shaped like a “U,” that has two sloping to steep walls at least 12 ft high, connected by transition, so that the skateboarder can create momentum like a pendulum, back and forth up the walls, then perform tricks into the air, or use the coping to grind and slide.