

## **Female Skateboarding: Re-writing Gender**

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In the opening paragraph of the article “Space, Place and Gender,” Doreen Massey remembers, as a nine or ten year old living on the outskirts of Manchester, her experience of “going into town” with her family. She remembers witnessing, every Saturday, the vast grassy land between home and Manchester city centre, passed by on the bus journey, having been divided up into hundreds of football and rugby pitches, and being entirely occupied by boys. She says:

I remember... it striking me very clearly – even then as a puzzled, slightly thoughtful little girl – that all this huge stretch of the Mersey flood plain had been entirely given over to boys... I did not go to those playing fields – they seemed barred, another world. (Massey 185)

The other world Massey identifies represents those spaces or places of human environments inaccessible to certain social and cultural groups. More specifically, it represents the difficulty which women face when participating in male gendered activities; for Massey it is not only the playing fields that seem barred but also the activity being undertaken.

Aside from their gendered nature – or perhaps because of this – traditional, competitive sports (such as football and rugby) are deemed to be of the greatest cultural importance, commanding consistent attention in the media. Therefore, such activities dominate in more ways than purely spatially or geographically. Traditional sports are often associated with hegemonic masculine attitudes, exemplified in the “Jock” stereotype and the Jock’s relationship to subordinated masculinities (such as the “Geek” – intelligent, non-aggressive and physically weak). Some non-traditional sports and

activities attempt to move away from this hierarchy, developing what Becky Beal describes as an “alternative masculinity” (204-220). In her research, which is focused on skateboarding, she states:

[t]he subculture of Skateboarders I investigated chose not to live completely by the traditional and hegemonic forms of masculinity. In doing so, they created an alternative masculinity, one which explicitly critiqued the more traditional form. For example, the skateboarders emphasized participant control, self expression, and open participation which differ greatly from the hegemonic values of adult authority, conformity, and elite competition. (204)

Here, Beal articulates participant control, self expression and open participation as features of an anti-hegemonic social organisation, which would seem to suggest that skateboarding is a progressive and positive activity. However, as is highlighted by Beal in her article, skateboarding’s liberalism and permissiveness is paradoxically compromised by an inherent sexism and heteromasculine focus within the subculture.

The focus of this paper is on the male dominated lifestyle/activity/sport/subculture of skateboarding.<sup>1</sup> The central argument is concerned with the notion of female skateboarders occupying an “edgeland” position within the subculture and how, from these edgelands, female participants might re-write their involvement through the performance of gender.

“Edgeland” is understood by Marion Shoard’s coining of the term to describe:

[t]he apparently unplanned, certainly uncelebrated and largely incomprehensible territory where town and country meet... as we flash past its seemingly meaningless contours in train, car or bus we somehow fail to register it on our retinas. When we deliberately visit it, this is often for mundane activities like taking the car to be serviced or household waste to the disposal plant, which we choose to discount as part of our lives. (118)

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<sup>1</sup> The contestation of what skateboarding *is* relates to the different modes in which skateboarding is perceived. Some skateboarders would not regard their practice as a sport; on the other hand, there has recently been a push to include skateboarding in the Olympic Games. The term “activity” seems to suggest light involvement rather than saturation within something, whilst the term “subculture” is rooted within cultural theory and may not necessarily be commonly understood or used by participants. In many cases it may be viewed as a lifestyle, influencing participant’s choices of clothing, music, art and also attitude.

Shoard is specific in her term, with edgelands referring to sites between town and country. But the term could also describe areas at the edges of the city or town, between city and suburb, such as the vast grey flatlands underneath ring-road carriageways or the dilapidated landscape of bygone industrial warehouses and service roads. The term could also refer to a cultural edgelands. Shoard states that, “[t]he edgelands are raw and rough and rather than seeming people-friendly are often sombre and menacing, flaunting their participation in activities we do not wholly understand” (121). Applying this quotation to the skateboarding subculture in general is straightforward, since attitudes towards skateboarders are often negative.

Skateboarding-related internet forums are rife with stories from skateboarders who report having been verbally and physically attacked whilst attempting to skateboard in public and private sites, whilst skateboard filmmakers regularly include documentation of confrontations between skateboarders and local authorities, business owners, or the public, in skate videos. Most examples present skateboarders as responsible and reasonable in these situations, such as in professional skateboarder, Anthony Pappalardo’s, section from the Transworld Skateboarding video *IE* (2001). In this video, Pappalardo, appealing to a police officer who has reprimanded him, says, “I’m giving you respect, I’m not talking back... now I just feel like I’m not getting respect back.” The police officer responds, “How do you figure that? I’m talking to you,” to which Pappalardo replies “You’re talking to me like an animal, not like a human being.” This dialogue posits skateboarders as victims of overzealous authorities, rather than as aggressive occupiers of sites; as James Davis points out, in his aptly titled book *Skateboarding is Not a Crime*,

[s]kateboarders have long been thought of as rebels, for various reasons... skaters... use the urban environment in a way which is not designed, and this often provokes a negative response from members of the public. It's a natural response – what they don't understand must inherently be bad. (82)

Davis's quotation suggests that confrontations are essentially an individual's articulation of their knowledge of the habitus of a specific site as a place that is not designed for skateboarding. Public opinion towards skateboarders, then, is strikingly similar to that of the public opinion towards Shoard's edgelands. Furthermore, from a socio-cultural perspective, a female skateboarder's participation in the activity is deemed unusual, due to the perception of skateboarding as being male-dominated, potentially injurious, and physically aggressive. Therefore, female skateboarders necessarily occupy a subcultural edgeland position, though, as is discussed later in this paper, some female skateboarders are finding methods of transgression.

Street skateboarding, or the application of tricks on objects not designed for skateboarding, demonstrates a physical and creative re-writing of the urban environment and the creation of an emotive performance text. The documentation of this exists in the marks caused by the interaction between the physical material of the skateboard and of the object used. This performance text, created predominantly by male skateboarders, is therefore interrupted by the mere participation of female skateboarders, who write themselves into this text, becoming performance interventions.

### **Representations of women in the skateboarding subculture**

Often women are only marginally involved in skateboarding when fulfilling supporting roles to a son, male friend or boyfriend - providing transport to locations around the country and support, attending skateboarding sessions and competitions, and so on. For

males, at the heart of being a skateboarder is an emphasis on displaying a heteromascularity, something exemplified by the inclusion of a female pole-dancing contest as the climactic evening's entertainment during the annual, Vans Skateboard Company, Summer Sessions event, held in Newquay, Cornwall, UK. Female skateboarders problematise this structure by occupying the realm of the male skateboarder and inevitably find themselves within social contexts that explicitly objectify women. This objectification is not limited to social events and everyday banter: graphics printed on to skateboard decks and images featured in advertising campaigns at times resemble soft-core pornography. A prime example of this can be seen in the marketing tactics of the Hubba Company. A typical example of one of their ads features an underwear-clad glamour model appearing to be sitting with a gigantic Hubba skateboarding wheel between her legs. In their most recent campaign, Hubba have produced two versions of an advertisement and are inviting the public to vote on which should appear in the next issue of the US skateboarding magazine, *Thrasher*. The two versions, which both feature the same, topless, glamour model, differ in the way the model is posed. In one, she is crouched next to the product with her legs extended across the image, in the other she is on all fours; with her back arched and her legs extending in front of the product. At the extreme of this, some companies have chosen to depict violence towards women in their graphics, as Borden states, "skateboard companies and magazines have increasingly used misogynist treatment of women as a way of selling skateboards" (147).

The representation of women as sex objects or in situations where they are ill-treated, "sells well" as an attitude because it reaffirms the heterosexuality of the

participant, in what is a heavily male – and ostensibly heterosexual – dominated performance arena. In America, the skateboarding publication *Big Brother* is “sold in plastic wrapping due to its ‘adult’ content” (Beal and Wilson 34) and interestingly, the title of the magazine seems to enforce hegemonic masculinity, with its readers projected into the role of the younger brother, rookie skater. “Harmless” sexist commentary which features so prolifically within skateboarding print makes it clear to female and homosexual participants that they do not meet the heteromasculine standards that define skater subculture, and females are sexually objectified by the heterosexual male skateboarder’s gaze.

Even in the arena of fashion, the female skateboarder is marginalised, with very few skateboarding companies catering to the female body shape in clothing design. This has implications for the female skateboarder, trying to fit into skateboard clothing, and a subculture, designed for men. The shoe company Gallaz, part of the Globe company, have produced skate shoes designed for “girls,” along with other well established skate companies, such as DC, Vans and Etnies. However, through selling these products to large mainstream chains, in which the non-skateboarding public may purchase a pair purely for fashionable purposes, female-orientated brands cannot carry the same sub-cultural currency as brands that are only available at specialist skate-shops. The skatewear company Fallen, for example, state in their advertising, “Fallen footwear is designed purely for skateboarding.” This, along with an emphasis on supporting local, independent skater owned shops (SOS), results in skateboard clothing designed specifically for women becoming devalued by its mainstream availability. By not being exclusive to the hallowed local skate-shop, it is not fully saturated in the subculture; in

just the same way that female participation is all too often regarded as frivolous and uncommitted.

One of the best ways of examining the skateboard industry's representations of women is to consider the contrasting ways in which female and male professional skateboarders are represented and marketed. Out of 77 skateboarding companies researched between December 2007 and April 2008, on the World Wide Web, 14 companies sponsored a total of 38 women.<sup>2</sup> These companies were selected because they all deal, specifically, in equipment and clothing designed for skateboarding, such as grip-tape, trucks, wheels, bearings, decks, and skateboarding shoes. They also all currently sponsor a professional and/or amateur company team, or provide their product to skateboarders as endorsement. It is important to note that the number of sponsorships does not reflect the number of individuals sponsored, since professional skateboarders often receive support from several companies. However, of those researched, 48 company sponsorships went to women, compared with 1173 sponsorships going to men. Interestingly, the (British) Rogue Skateboards and (North American) Villa Villa Cola skateboarding companies, which are the only specifically female brands included in this research, were both difficult to find information for. Rogue Skateboards' main point of information is their Myspace layout. Similarly, the only web information available for Villa Villa Cola was a link to a trailer for their skate video, featuring 12 female skaters

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<sup>2</sup> These companies were: Alien Workshop, Adio, Adidas Skateboarding, Almost, Arise, Avera, Bacon, Baker, Billabong, Blacklabel, Blind, Blueprint, 5 Boro, Bones Bearings, Circa, Chocolate, Darkstar, DC (USA), Death, Dekline, Destructo, Duffs UK, DVS, Element, Elwood, Emerica, Enjoi, Enuff, Es, Etnies, Fallen, FDK Bearings, Flip, Foundation, Fourstar, Gallaz, Girl, Globe, Grindking, Habitat, Hawk Shoes, Heroin, Hijinx, Hubba, Hurley, Independent, Krooked, Lakai, Lib Tech, MADA, Matix, Mob Grip, Mystery, Nike Skateboarding (SB), Osiris, Pig Wheels, Plan B, Powell, Premium, Quicksilver, Real, Ricta, Rogue, Royal Trucks, Santa Cruz, Silver Truck Company, Slave, Supra, Third Choice, Thunder Trucks, Toy Machine, Vans (USA, UK, Austria, France, Germany, Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland), Villa Villa Cola, Volcom, Vox, Zero and Zoo York.

from around the world. This strongly suggests that these companies also occupy an edgeland position, this time within the skateboarding industry.

Most of the companies researched supported their female skateboarders on a separate, linked website under a “Girls” section. The contrast in the profile pictures and biographic information for female and male skateboarders is particularly notable, with many of the companies opting for posed “fashion” shots of the females, compared with pictures of male skateboarders that, generally, present them in the act of skateboarding. In some cases, no images at all were supplied of the “girls” actually skateboarding. Some companies, however, choose not to separate female and male skateboarders in this way. Vans USA sponsor Cara-Beth Burnside, Vans Austria sponsor Sabrina Goeggal, Vans France sponsor Lisa Jacob, and Element sponsor Vanessa Torres, Lacey Baker and Evelien Bouillart, all alongside their male skaters. Zero included the world-renowned skater, Elissa Steamer as one of the main team, not differentiating her as sponsored woman.

However, Steamer is a particularly interesting case. On the Etnies website, she features in both the male and female teams, with her profile information displaying the following statement of her achievements and her previous role as a team rider for the Toy Machine Company:

[s]he regularly makes the cut skating with the boys, and is virtually unrivalled among her female peers... From the get-go, Toy Machine treated Elissa as just another rider, rather than as the head of a girl's division or as a side project. However, it was not until her 1996 appearance in Toy Machine's *Welcome to Hell* video that many in skateboarding consider one of the most influential of all times that Elissa truly made an impact. Her exposure in the video single-handedly redefined the role of women in skateboarding and ushered in a new era of talented female skaters... Elissa continues to dominate nearly every all-female event she enters... The fact of the matter, however, is that Elissa is simply a great skater not just a great female skater. (“Elissa Steamer”)

Here, Etnies sum up the industry perspective on female skateboarding by acknowledging that females and males are treated differently; that females are not required to be up to the same standard as males. The quotation also suggests that Steamer broke the mould of previous female skaters by having proved her ability to skate “like a guy.” Steamer is also included in the Etnies “Girls” pages, as the girl who managed to transcend the female-only section. On the same website, and again while referring to Elissa Steamer, professional skateboarder and founder of the Toy Machine company, Ed Templeton, states:

Obviously, she’s the best girl skater, and the thing is that she doesn’t skate ‘like a girl.’ It’s in quotes because, for some reason, everyone knows what you mean when you say that, even though it sounds like a lame thing to say. She has a good style, stands up straight and skates like a guy. (“Elissa Steamer”)

Templeton reveals an inherent sexism within the subculture by admitting his concern over using the term “like a girl,” but sanctioning his use of it by recognising it as commonly used and understood. In the above context, skating “like a girl” implies skating “to a lesser extent,” and this is a view enforced in the way skateboarding companies construct teams. In comparison to Steamer, then, “girl skater” becomes a category that actually refers to a lower standard of skateboarding rather than a biological difference between female and male skateboarders. In relation to Shoard’s edgelands, the male-centric skateboarding industry appears to have co-opted a female gendered edgelands through heterosexually orientated entertainment, the notion of skateboarding “like a girl,” and through the constructed supporting-role of women as spectator in the performance of skateboarding.

**Marisa Dal Santo**

In November 2007, a video clip was posted onto the *Sidewalk Magazine* online skateboarding forum with a caption below it reading, “Just in case you don’t know, Marisa is female.” The inclusion of this comment alongside the posting of the video suggested there might be some confusion. On viewing the footage, three things are apparent - first, the standard of skateboarding exceeds that of most female skateboarders, by the range of tricks demonstrated. Second, Marisa’s physical appearance is noticeably “masculine,” to the extent that she would be easily mistaken for a young male; her androgynous natural features and hairstyle are rendered more “masculine” by her choice of physical clothing, which is reminiscent of all-male 70s/80s rock band, The Ramones. Third, her skateboarding style is more aggressive than is generally demonstrated by female skateboarders, in terms of the speed and force with which she performs tricks. In her consistency and success in competitions against both female and male contestants, Dal Santo has become one of the latest up-and-coming skateboarding talents. Talking about her experiences of attending female competitions, she says:

The guys’ contests go on for 3 days while the girls’ contests go on for 20 minutes. There’s usually 10 people at the most in the crowd... [a]t most of them, we all get paid something so it’s win/win even if you get last. For those same reasons they’re also kind of lame and embarrassing, cause it shows how low girls are viewed in skateboarding. I’m still backing them though. (Dal Santo)

Dal Santo expresses an interesting tension between getting paid to do something you enjoy and concern over female involvement being regarded as inadequate. Her final sentence and use of the word “them” suggests that she feels distanced from the “skater girl” category, whilst at the same time expressing a desire to be supportive towards female skateboarders.

Having started skateboarding at the age of 10, Dal Santo's practice has always been as the only female within a small group of males; she states that she has "never skated with girls outside of contests" (Dal Santo). When asked whether she would feel comfortable being on an all-female skate team, she remarked, "No, I've always skated with guys and I feel as if it helped me in the long run. I try to stay closer to their level of skating." (Dal Santo.) Many skateboarders believe, as Dal Santo's statement suggests, that a person's ability to skateboard is affected by the general level of the group of which that person is part. Dal Santo makes a conscious effort to transcend the arbitrary lower standard that has come to be expected of female skateboarders. Her presence within the subculture, alongside skaters with a similar approach (such as Steamer), is important in the way that they explode this mythology.

Dal Santo's performance has allowed her to become well respected in the skateboarding subculture. When asked if she had ever experienced any negative attitudes towards her by male skateboarders, she replied: "No not really. The only people that have vibed me for skating were the girls in my class in like 6th grade. They'd say 'girls don't do that' and all that jazz. But I'd like to see what they're up to these days" (Dal Santo). Dal Santo's young peers' responses to her extra-curricular activities suggest that as performance, she may be having as much of an effect on mainstream culture as skateboarding culture.

Similarly, another American female skateboarder, Alexis Sablone, in a 2002 interview with *Thrasher*, states: "I think girls should just skate in regular contests. I don't think girls should have to have their own category – they should just be in a skateboard contest. Girls just skate with guys, it's all the same" (Dyer and Burnett). Sablone's

statement resonates with the more recent concerns of Dal Santo, whilst the article's authors, Erin Dyer and Michael Burnett, draw a clear comparison between Sablone and Steamer – and particularly to their physically aggressive approach to skating – as they state, “[o]ne similarity I've noticed between you and Elissa is that you can both take a beating. How hurt do you have to be to quit?” (Dyer and Burnett). Sablone replies, “[j]ust never; never quit. You can't stop 'til you land a trick, then after you land it is when you really feel it.” (Dyer and Burnett)

This attitude is also reflected in Sablone's section from the Coliseum video *P.J. Ladd's Wonderful Horrible Life* (2002) in which Sablone is seen to “slam”<sup>3</sup> down a set of nine steps, three times. On the third time, she momentarily writhes in agony on the ground before getting up. The person filming her asks if she is ok, to which she determinedly says “yeah” before hastily grabbing her board and running back up the steps for another attempt, in an explicit demonstration of her physical endurance. What is most pertinent about Sablone, Dal Santo, and Steamer, is the way in which their approaches to skateboarding are marked by an adoption of the masculine, as a tactic for being successful. Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble* states that “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, that identity is formatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (Butler 34). Importantly, Sablone, Dal Santo and Steamer's expressions of masculinity do not suggest a desire to be male; they are not exemplary of any inherent “male-ness.” Sablone, Dal Santo and Steamer's success within skateboarding is necessarily achieved through a performance, which is reliant upon the utilisation of costuming and expressive attitude.

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<sup>3</sup> A commonly used term to describe when a skateboarder falls whilst attempting a trick

In relation to this performance, similar behaviour can be seen outside the skateboarding subculture; in a recent article published in the *Guardian*, titled “Why Does Hilary Clinton Wear Such Bad Clothes?” writer Hadley Freeman states,

It is obvious to the point of cliché that Clinton is in a trickier position in many ways than Obama: when he is emotional, he is persuasive; when she is emotional, she is betraying her feminist roots. So just as Obama can cut a dash in his slimline, clearly style-conscious suits, Clinton has to hide herself in garishly coloured squares going under the name of “jackets”, or else risk being dismissed as so vain that she would be too busy putting on her lipstick to respond to an international terror threat...last year, when there was a bit of a hoo-ha in the US press about Clinton showing some cleavage, instead of dismissing it as the load of misogynistic nonsense it was, she seems to have taken this to heart and buried herself ever since in shapeless, defeminised, frequently yellow (yellow!) suits.

Freeman sees Clinton’s expressions as an attempt to “defeminise” herself – to hide or detract from physical features that explicitly reference her female-ness or femininity. She expresses a tension in the way emotion and a care over personal appearance is perceived when it is expressed by a woman and by a man who are both attempting to prove their ability to be president. There are, of course, major differences between the practices of Sablone, Dal Santo, Steamer and Hilary Clinton. Nevertheless, their (perceived) negation of the “feminine” as a viable choice of presentation of the self seems to be intrinsically central to their position in their chosen professional arenas.

### **Conclusion**

The skateboarding subculture and the heteromasculine standards that define it are produced and upheld by the objectification of women in advertising campaigns, comments within skateboarding publications and in the graphic designs of skateboard decks. Skateboarding, as an activity, functions as a subversive performance text of the city, written physically by skaters – a majority of whom are male – into spaces. The

involvement of women within the subculture, as skateboarders themselves, problematises this structure and positions female skateboarders, by their very presence, as performance interventions in what is a predominantly male performance text. Gender stratification has come to be accepted within the subculture with female only skate teams and competitions ensuring this separation and that the category of “female skating” occupies an edgeland position within the subculture.

Within male-orientated skateboarding circles, notions of skating “like a girl” demonstrate the construction of an arbitrary lower-echelon applied to females that skaters like Sablone, Steamer and Dal Santo disprove through their achievements and their refusal to be restricted. Importantly, Sablone, Steamer and Dal Santo’s styles of skateboarding and styles of dress and behaviour explicitly reference masculinity, which has the effect of their incorporation into the “centre” of the subculture, marked by their inclusion on team videos and their featuring in the popular skateboarding press. Therefore, their intervention is problematic in that whilst it helps to redefine notions of “girl skateboarder” as well as highlight the performed nature of gender, it also perpetuates masculinity as the centred normative. Their presentation of masculinity and the success this achieves, relates to Luce Irigaray’s claim, as it is defined by Butler, that “[t]here is only one sex, the masculine, that elaborates itself in and through the production of the ‘other’” (Butler 25). This production of the “other,” or of a subcultural edgeland, ensures that the heteromale aspects of the subculture remain intact, suggesting that within skateboarding, it is presentations of femininity and possibly, homosexuality, that are “othered.”

The “defeminised” performances of Sablone, Steamer and Dal Santo therefore represent an intervention – albeit one which raised questions of inclusion, conformity, and the possibility of a “feminine” intervention – from the “edgelands” into this heteromasculine subculture.

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