Book Review: Snyder, Gregory J., *Skateboarding LA: Inside Professional Street Skateboarding*. **New York: New York University Press. 2018. ISBN: 0814737919 (Paperback). 320 Pages. $30.00.**

Reviewed by Tyler Dupont[1]

I initially heard that Gregory Snyder was studying skateboarders while in the field gathering data for my dissertation, which examined the careers of local, amateur, and professional skaters. While enjoying dinner in between skate sessions in 2013, one of my respondent's friends mentioned that Snyder had interviewed him about skateboarding. However, before I had a chance to learn more about the project, we were packing up our stuff and heading off to the next spot. Years later, when I saw Snyder had published his book, *Skateboarding LA: Inside Professional Street Skateboarding*, I thought back to that night and I was excited to read his manuscript.

   Snyder sections his book into four parts: a broad examination of skate culture; the careers of those within the subculture of skateboarding; skateboarding spots; and the politics of skateboarding via an investigation of the city's decision to endorse the West Los Angeles Civic Center (known as the Courthouse) as a legitimate skate spot. The strongest of these sections is Snyder's discussion of skateboard spots and his account of the campaign to turn the Courthouse into a legal skate spot.

   Snyder's intense interest in learning the tricks and key spaces within skateboarding stands out within his book. He develops a deep understanding of the key spaces within skateboarding and the skaters' interactions with these spaces by physically visiting the sites, via his unique use of photographs as a research tool, and regularly questioning

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his sample about spots (and potential spots). The complexity and nuance of the skaters' interactions with these sacred sites comes shining through in this section. Snyder allows the reader to understand how common spaces within the city come to develop subcultural capital within skateboarding and how skateboarders obtain subcultural capital by preforming tricks within these esteemed spaces.

Moreover, the final section of Snyder's manuscript investigates the political process behind the West Los Angeles Civic Center becoming a sanctioned skate spot within the city. Importantly, Snyder's account counters the belief that Nike freed the Courthouse alone (an inaccurate belief that I have found to be quite common among my research subjects). This section also displays the roles that Alex Beck and Snyder's brother played in securing the space as a sanctioned skate spot and how skaters may redefine the city not simply through short term surface level acts of resistance, but through conventional political maneuvers. Furthermore, this section's focus on the behaviors of older skaters adds to the growing literature on how older lifestyle sport participants negotiate their subcultural identities as they age (see O'Connor, 2018 and Wheaton, 2017)

However, the strength of the second half of Snyder's manuscript is undercut by significant issues within the first half of the book. Within Snyder's discussion of skate culture and the economics of skateboarding, he runs into four significant issues that undermine his work. First, Snyder lacks sociological distance from his subjects, which may bias his findings and his interpretations. Second, the book contains multiple inaccuracies that amplify concerns about the validity of his findings and conclusions. Third, Snyder ignores or oversimplifies previous work on skateboarding and lifestyle sports, weakening his ability to interpret contemporary skateboarding. Finally, similar to other post-subculture scholars, his resistance to the Birmingham School results in overlooking key sociological issues related to class, race, gender, and other socio-structural attributes, which removes discussions of power from his study.

As stated above, Snyder's methods and writing style work wonders in relation to developing and presenting a clear understanding of spots within skateboarding and their social significance. However, Snyder's methods, specifically his use of his brother as a key informant coupled with his intense admiration of his sample creates significant issues within the manuscript. Recently, Gary Alan Fine (2017) emphasized the need for skeptical ethnography; while Fine's essay appears to be a response to calls for "public ethnographies," his concerns also apply to Snyder's

work which lacks a critical interpretation of his data and often appears to promote his respondents' perspectives.

Snyder's access to skateboarding via his brother, a former professional skater and a current judge for the skateboard contest Street League, grants him entrée into a unique social world of professional skateboarding. However, it appears that Snyder does not account for the dangers that accompany his intimate relationships with the skaters in his sample. Snyder's allegiance to his family and admiration of his respondents may have hurt his ability to "transcend local and taken for granted explanations" (Fine, 2017, 3). A key example of this occurs when Snyder mentions, "it should be clearly understood that the 'hate' is motivated by jealousy. Many of the people who complain the loudest about others skaters could never accomplish the feats they're critiquing" (60). This simplistic understanding of "hate" lacks a sociological interpretation of how critiques (and dismissals of critiques) affect power relations within the field of skateboarding. This explanation does not help the reader understand why some skaters may criticize Nyjah Huston or Ryan Sheckler, but those same critical skaters may praise other talented skaters such as Andrew Reynolds, Daewon Song, or Fred Gall.

Building upon these risks, Snyder does not use pseudonyms within his manuscript. Without the fog of anonymity, he further risks that any non-sympathetic analysis may represent a form of betrayal to those within his sample. This risk is amplified as the threat is potentially passed on to his brother whose employer (Street League) and the skaters he judges, are discussed at length throughout the book. The risk of betrayal or a desire to protect may encourage Snyder to use overly warm descriptions of his respondents and present subjective claims as hard data. For example, Snyder proclaims, "Street League has become what few thought possible, a prestigious contest attended by all of the top pros" (133). Here, Snyder accepts his sample's interpretation, a group who directly benefits from the contest, as representing consensus across professional skateboarding as a whole. However, this appraisal ignores the tensions that continue to surround the contest. Any discussion of contemporary dissent appears to be absent within the manuscript, despite *Thrasher*'s 2007 Skater of the Year, Marc Johnson publicly proclaiming that he wanted nothing to do with the contest. The long standing professional skater, Jeff Grosso also recently compared the contest to watching paint dry, and Google Trends noted that the number of searches for "Street League" on Google and YouTube have declined for years. Snyder does not appear to reflect on how studying his brother and an institution that

his brother relies on as a source of identity and income may affect his data and his interpretations.

Second, Snyder's manuscript contains inaccurate data, which may have lead the author to form unreliable conclusions. Some of these statements are benign mistakes that do not bear weight on the validity of his work. For example, the author inaccurately notes that Kayo Corp distributes Element Skateboards. This appears to be a simple typo as it appears the author simply mixed up Element Skateboards with Expedition Skateboards. However, the author inaccurately claims that Stevie Williams was the first African American skater to obtain his own signature shoe in 2001. While Stevie Williams has carved out a space for himself within the history of skateboarding, he was not the first African American to receive his own signature shoe. Globe released Gershon Mosley's signature shoe a year before Williams obtained his shoe on DC. DVS released Sean Sheffey's pro shoe in 1999 and Keenan Milton's pro shoe in 1996. DuFFS released Kareem Campbell's pro shoe in 1995 and Etnies released Sal Barbier's iconic Sal 23 in 1994. Similarly, the author incorrectly claims that "since skateboard decks are disposable there is no business impetus to create a more technologically sophisticated product" and "except for some experimentation with shapes, there has been no effort whatsoever to "improve the skateboard" (38). However, a company partially owned by Rodney Mullen, a skater Snyder discussed in the paragraph preceding this statement, has attempted to improve skateboards by introducing decks with carbon inlays and carbon foam cores. Finally, Snyder inaccurately claims, "For nearly two decades prior to Street League, most top pros did not compete in contests" (133). However, prior to the first Street League contest in 2010, many prominent professional skaters such as Chris Senn, Eric Koston, Andrew Reynolds, and Chris Cole competed in the X-Games, Dew Tour, and the Maloof Money Cup. As an authoritative text on professional skateboarding, these misrepresentations are cause for concern.

The errors become more significant as Snyder investigates the political economy of skateboarding. While focusing in on skate shoes, Snyder creates a false dichotomy between corporate brands and "skater owned brands." He paints corporate brands, specifically Nike, as clueless when he incorrectly states, "the executives at Nike don't know what a kickflip is even though every 15-year-old knows what this is" (15). Moreover, he stresses the skater owned brands' connections to the scene via their employment of skaters as shoe designers, marketers, and distributors, while ignoring that skaters also hold these same positions within the corporate brands such as Nike, Vans, Converse, and Adidas. Finally, the

companies he cites as skater owned (DC, Lakai, DVS, and HUF) are fully owned or partially owned by corporations or investment firms themselves. For example, Quicksilver, who is now owned by Oaktree Capital Management, acquired DC Shoes in 2004. The skate shoe companies' historical and contemporary roles in skateboarding certainly deserve critical inquiry (as Gomez, 2012; Hampton, 2006; and Howell, 2004 have done in the past), but Snyder's errors impede his attempt to investigate the economics of skateboarding.

Third, the manuscript's inaccuracies also extend to the work of other scholars who have investigated the social world of skateboarding. Snyder mistakenly claims that his study is the first ethnographic investigation of skateboarding. However, there have been quite a few ethnographic studies of skateboarding. Among others, Beal's 1995 ethnography examined the politics of a local skateboard contest in Colorado, Willard's 1998 ethnography examined professional skateboarding's relationship with the city, and Chivers-Yochim's 2009 enthographic book examined the social world of skateboarding. Furthermore, Snyder contends, "Becky Beal and her colleague Belinda Wheaton's view, casual skateboarders (fans) gain subcultural 'authenticity', not from actual board skills, but from reading the skateboard magazines and learning the language, which inspires a "real" subcultural identity, opposed to an inauthentic identity proffered by mainstream media and corporations not affiliated with skateboarding" (171). Unfortunately, this is a significant misreading or mischaracterization of Beal and Wheaton's work. Neither Beal nor Wheaton claims that authenticity is developed from simply interpreting images rather than participating in the activity itself. Instead, the goal of their study was to "explore the role of subcultural media in the formation and reaffirmation of the participants' identities" (Wheaton & Beal, 2003, 172). Further, Beal's and Wheaton's extensive research have explored other aspects related to identity and status within skateboarding. Snyder's omissions and misreadings weaken the foundation on which he builds his interpretations.

Finally, similar to other post-subculture scholars, Snyder tends to look past the skaters' social, economic, and cultural realities in order to focus on the individual and the notion of agency within the market of skateboarding. Snyder paints skateboarding as primarily a social-world where class, race, and gender melt away as long as one has talent. While the post-subculture theorists have rightfully shown we cannot simply retreat back to the Birmingham School's interpretation of subcultures, critiques of the post-subcultures paradigm remind us that we cannot simply ignore the social structure either (See Blackman, 2005 and

Jensen, 2006). Skateboarding is not a realm where socio-structural variables lose all meaning and cease to affect the skaters' lives. The skaters' experiences, responsibilities, cultures, and identities outside of the subculture, affect them within the subculture as well. While, at times, skateboarding can be a mental escape from one's personal problems, it is not a world that actually detaches the skater from those problems. Just as the act of skateboarding may prompt physical reactions that take the skaters out of the zone by reminding them of past injuries via lingering pain, social interactions within skateboarding may take the skaters out of the zone by reinforcing inequalities in society at large.

Snyder's book contains an accessible style that opens the physical world of skateboarding to his readers. His work on key spots within the subculture is a testament to the power of his unique qualitative methods and his enthusiastic approach to understanding skateboarding. However, his relationship with his sample and the questionable validity of his data undercut the strength of his examination of the social world of professional skateboarding. Snyder appears to act as a voice for his respondents, specifically his brother, which results in a lack of reflexivity and diminishes his ability to critically interpret skateboarding.

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