

BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

Snyder, Gregory. *Skateboarding LA: Inside Professional Street Skateboarding*. New York: NYU Press, 2017, pp. 297, \$30.00, (9780814737910).

There has been a recent spate of academic books and articles focused upon action/lifestyle sports, with skateboarding being an especially frequent topic of investigation. In terms of scope, this particular book from sociologist and ethnographer Gregory Snyder illustrates the lives, spaces, and community of urban male street skaters in Los Angeles that aspire to become or already are professionals. Skateboarding, like many other action/lifestyle sport pursuits, has become much more popular since the turn of the new Millennium, with new, diverse participants utilizing both the city street and proliferating skate parks. Snyder clearly situates this book within the traditional urban masculine skate demographic that has historically been street-based. Indeed, up front, he outlines that “This book is about professional street skateboarding, a highly refined, athletic, and aesthetic pursuit, from which a large number of people profit...” (9).

The book’s focus on male-oriented street skateboarding relies heavily upon the oft-used concept of urban subcultures. Snyder invokes this conceptual cornerstone in order to support the idea that his male urban skater participants have a unique set of beliefs, aesthetic styles, working practices, and communal norms. He consequently argues that skaters can gain more kudos depending on how they adhere to and display sub-cultural markers and codes. For instance, the book offers some examples of how street skaters hoping to advance in this social field need to be seen as technically proficient and yet remain modest and team players. Further, Snyder provides readers with comprehensive descriptions of skaters and their affiliates, demonstrative of his immersion within the field.

Snyder eventually takes the reader into more nuanced territory by explaining that classic subcultural ideas, which pitted young working-class males in a symbolic struggle against mainstream capitalist society, should also now account for subcultural entrepreneurialism. This line of analysis dovetails with current work in the field that engages with the neo-liberal condition, revealing that seemingly playful and ‘DIY’ activ-

ities such as skateboarding are actually highly sophisticated capitalist endeavors, from which a range of individuals can profit. Quite recent skate scholarship from Kara-Jane Lombard, for example, is used by Snyder to support the argument that subcultures like skaters are now highly engaged in entrepreneurial and industry practices. Snyder's correct take here is that "while skaters subscribe to an antiestablishment worldview, it is not necessarily resistant in terms of politics or economics" (14).

Indeed, one of this book's strengths is how it details the vast collective of individuals underpinning the social network of street and professional skateboarding, which includes "'filmmers,' photographers, video editors, writers, journalists, shoe designers, clothing designers, graphic artists, team managers, web designers, and company owners, to name just a few" (10). From this interactionist perspective of the contemporary male skate scene and its diverse actors, Snyder offers the compelling view that skateboarding's unique social field produces numerous "sub-cultural careers." In this way, Snyder rightly reminds us that today's subcultures have significant opportunities (including through social media and other modes of promotion/production) from which members can gain various capitals.

Grounded in the 'street,' Snyder's analysis into male skate culture of course entails unpacking the politics of urban public space. Snyder, like others before, tells us that the street is the training ground and site of social interaction for his particular male skate demographic. Quite simply, it is the crucial context where skater careers are made—or not. In this regard, Snyder draws upon a range of appropriate architectural, sociological, and urban scholars that have influenced skateboarding studies including Iain Borden, Ocean Howell, Francisco Vivoni, Kara-Jane Lombard, and Chihsin Chiu. Snyder also discusses how the "Chicago School" of urban sociology and, more pertinently, the "LA School" of postmodern geography (including classic works from Mike Davis and Edward Soja) have contributed to our understanding of urban skaters' socially-dynamic and lived experiences. Snyder's analysis will thus benefit those who are new to the idea of skateboarding and lived/social spatial interactions.

Snyder's subcultural viewpoint will not be new to action/lifestyle sport sociologists, as subcultural analyses of how male practitioners do or do not gain social, economic and cultural capital have been around for some time. Curiously, Snyder claims that "this is the first ethnographic study of skateboarding" (16), which is very questionable given the raft of work in the field essentially using the same field research approach over the past 20 years. Further, scholars such as Belinda Wheaton, Mark Stranger, and Holly Thorpe have investigated similar male-oriented subcultures such as snowboarding and (wind)surfing. In addition, Snyder

is somewhat repetitive in contextualizing and presenting his arguments about subcultures and urban spatial usage, and the book could have benefited from more succinct descriptions of skate spots and tricks.

Readers of Snyder's book would also benefit from engagement with Emily Chiver-Yochim's book *Skate Life* which makes a similar argument about the commercialized inclinations of authenticity-seeking male skateboarders as they balance subcultural ideals with mainstream capitalist/entrepreneurial influences. Chivers-Yochim's book was also a thick, rich ground-level account on skateboarding, but with a more everyday cohort of male skaters, and a more critical perspective of masculinity, race/ethnicity, and cultural consumption/reproduction. This leads me to the next point. Snyder's book provides only passing references to critical socio-cultural issues facing skateboarding. For example, gender issues (which have been extensively examined in other field studies) are given quite light treatment. There are few, brief insights provided in this book about the growing impact of females in urban skateboarding. And females are absent in Snyder's own study, which he explains quite problematically: "despite repeated attempts, I was unable to develop anything more than a cursory relationship with female skaters. This is in part because I did not want to simply reach out to female skaters solely because of their gender, and this is likely the same reason that female skaters tend to be suspicious of male researchers" (57). He provides no evidence to support this claim about research with female skaters, and simply provides an unhelpful endnote about a women's skate program. Another subsequent endnote states that he tried to reach out to *one* female skater. Therefore, the reader gets little sense of the barriers that street-based and high-level female skaters have when it comes to accessing urban space and the lucrative skate industries.

Snyder does concede that racial, ethnic, and class tensions impact skateboarding, recognizing that 'the wealthiest, most mainstream skateboarders... are all white' except for a couple notable exceptions (59). Here, he uses the example of Paul Rodriguez Jr. to argue that skateboarding is not just for 'white skaters with movie star looks' (59), as 'Paul is a brown-skinned Latin male and is the face of skateboarding for Nike, Target, and Mountain Dew' (59). This type of nascent socio-cultural analysis requires more contemplation; indeed, a counter-argument is that Rodriguez Jr. is regularly promoted as a sweet-faced "boy next door who made it" type, rather than representing any significant minority ethnic or racial affiliation or politics.

Perhaps, then, this book accomplishes what it sets out to do; that is, *Skateboarding LA* provides a personal and descriptive ethnographic account of how male skaters based in the street and associated industries

continue in their various attempts to progress the sport. In this regard, Snyder's depiction of spatial usage, capital codes and benefits, as well as communal activism found within today's neo-liberal skateboarding scene is compelling. These ideas definitely warrant further investigation by skateboarding scholars. Those seeking to gain a more holistic understanding of the skateboarding phenomenon could read this book in conjunction with other more critical sources that are available.

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