

Grinding inequality: gender, race and class
in South African street skateboarding

Dissertation

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2 Introduction

Skateboarding is a relatively young sport and youth culture, in its modern form only a few decades old it has been a controversial phenomenon since its beginnings, at times associated with high injury risks, rebelliousness and the destruction of property. In the past two decades, though, it has become a recognised and valued mainstream sport and youth culture in the western world. When I approached the subject of skateboarding for my dissertation project in 2014, skateboarding seemed to go through a hype phase, particularly in Western Europe and North America. Skateboarding-branded clothing was sold by large fashion chains, skateparks were popping up in many parts of the world, skateboarding was about to become part of the 2020 Olympics, and journalistic and academic articles about the sport and subculture seemed to appear in larger numbers. It was also increasingly taken into account by architects and urban planners when designing public spaces. The British architect and urban design scholar Iain Borden called out the ‘new skate city’ in a journalistic piece, shedding light on skateboarding’s increasing integration in urban architecture.¹

When reading up on academic and popular literature on skateboarding, and watching countless skateboarding videos online, I stumbled upon non-governmental organisations (NGOs) promoting skateboarding in the ‘global south’. In the early 2010s, Skateistan² was certainly the most visible NGO in the media sphere, at least partly triggered by the unconventional approach of the NGO offering skateboarding workshops amidst war-torn Afghanistan, and the unusual imagery released by the NGO portraying headscarf-wearing Afghan girls and women skating ramps and other obstacles in Kabul.³ The organisation skilfully used the strong symbolic tension of such depictions in its marketing material: supposedly oppressed, veiled Arab women and girls in a crisis area seemed to express and liberate themselves self-confidently by being introduced to a genuine American sport and youth culture by western activists. The NGO aimed to carry its programs to other ‘crisis areas’, announced to open a project site in Johannesburg in 2015 and opened the facility in 2016⁴. The NGO argued that the approach developed in its project sites in Afghanistan could also be applied to South Africa: according to the NGO’s founder, children and youth in both

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- 1 Borden, Iain (20.04.2015): The new skate city: how skateboarders are joining the urban mainstream, The Guardian, online-source: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/apr/20/skate-city-skateboarders-developers-bans-defensive-architecture> [accessed: 02.06.2020].
 - 2 Skateistan: Empowering children through skateboarding and education [website], online-source: <https://www.skateistan.org/> [accessed: 16.11.2021].
 - 3 However, after the withdrawal of U.S. forces and the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan in 2021, Skateistan suspended all programs in the country.
 - 4 Skateslate (09.01.2016): Skateistan Johannesburg skate school opens in south africa [blog post], online-source: <https://skateslate.com/blog/2016/09/01/skateistan-johannesburg-skate-school-opens-in-south-africa/> [accessed: 02.06.2020].

countries had to deal with harsh and potentially traumatising life circumstances, and skateboarding could act as a coping and empowerment practice, and promote social integration.⁵

A number of other skate NGOs were running projects in various parts of the world, too. I was particularly interested in NGOs being active in South Africa. Among them was the NGO Indigo which operated a skatepark in the middle of a Zulu village in KwaZulu-Natal, claiming to provide local children and youth new life opportunities.⁶ Skateboarding superstar Tony Hawk had visited the site and approved its importance by stating that “Indigo is proof that skateboarding can change the world”⁷, referencing Nelson Mandela’s famous statement that “sport has the power to change the world”⁸. German skateboarder Louis Taubert had started the NGO Pigeon Plan to distribute skateboarding equipment to marginalised children and youth in the Western Cape, and offer skateboarding workshops over the course of a few weeks.⁹ Mthunzi Fesi, a South African residing in the south of Germany, was collecting donations for his NGO-project Outlangish with the aim to provide skateboarding equipment and workshops to kids in Langa, a poor neighbourhood in Cape Town.¹⁰ The German skateboarding entrepreneur and millionaire, Titus Dittmann, had founded an NGO, after having supported Skateistan with donated, used gear in 2008¹¹, and intended to promote skateboarding with numerous projects worldwide, several of them on the African continent, one of them in Cape Town’s CBD. Advertising for his NGO, Dittmann toured through commercial and state media in Germany, claiming an extraordinary pedagogical value of skateboarding making it an ideal tool to work with marginalised children and youth.¹²

Most skate NGOs I encountered, although working in different areas of the world and social contexts, would claim similar arguments regarding the value of skateboarding in social and developmental work: it would contribute to ‘breaking down social boundaries’, it would teach generally important ‘life skills’ like self-discipline, resilience and frustration tolerance, it would allow setting individual goals and aims, and it would foster a creative approach towards urban

5 CQP (n.d.): Oliver Percovich, Founder – Skateistan [website], online-source: <https://c-qp.com/interviews/oliver-percovich-founder-skateistan/> [accessed: 02.06.2020].

6 National Geographic (13.11.2016): See How Skateboarding Is Changing Lives in Rural South Africa | Short Film Showcase [video], Youtube, online-source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEWspwurnvg> [accessed: 04.06.2020].

7 Laureus (n.d.): Skateboarding is Life [website], online-source: <https://www.laureus.co.za/skateboarding-is-life/> [accessed: 30.05.2020].

8 Laureus (09.02.2002): Nelson Mandela's Iconic Speech - "Sport has the power to change the world" - Full Version [video], Youtube, online-source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1-7w-bJCtY> [accessed: 08.06.2020].

9 The Pigeon Plan e.V.: Homepage [website], online-source: <https://www.thepigeonplan.de/> [accessed: 07.08.2018].

10 Outlangish: Bretter die die Welt bedeuten [website], online-source: <http://www.outlangish.com/> [accessed: 02.06.2020].

11 Skate-aid (24.08.2010): skate-aid supporting Skateistan 2008 [video], Youtube, online-source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPdF_k9gIJc [accessed: 02.06.2020].

12 Skate-aid international e.V. (n.d.): Wir machen Kinder stark! Help across the board [website], online-source: <https://www.skate-aid.org/> [accessed: 02.06.2020].

public spaces and bodily self-expression. Moreover, quite a few NGOs claimed that in skateboarding social differences and inequalities related to race, class, gender, sexuality and even disability would not matter, emphasising a presumed openness and inclusivity of the sport valuing social diversity and individual achievement. In this sense, it was argued, creating skateboarding spaces equalled creating socially integrated spaces. This claim was not least disseminated by influential academics in and around the skateboarding industry, like Iain Borden, who was mentioning a South African case in a publication in 2019:

“Skateboarding at its heart shows a tendency towards openness and inclusivity, and [...] has been used for social empowerment worldwide. For not it is worth noting how, as Wheaton recounts, at the Indigo Skate Camp and North Beach Park in Durban, South Africa, and with aid from pro Dallas Oberholzer, skateboarding has steered kids away from drugs, alcohol and HIV and towards healthier lifestyles and education. Significantly, skateboarding here avoids the whites-only connotations of colonial sports like rugby and cricket, while its focus on individual self-direction also renders it suitable for young, Black communities. Through hybridizing vernacular cultures like Kwaito rap music with US cultural forms like skateboarding, as one skater explained, ‘skating brings us all together’. And, Wheaton concludes, skateboarding has here produced a variety of complex cultural flows and so has helped reconfigure lifestyle sport cultures and identities.” (Borden 2019: 29)

Commentators such as Borden thus attributed skateboarding a particular value in promoting individual development and social integration in (post-)colonial societies. Typical in the discourse around skateboarding’s supposed integrative qualities was the suggestion that the sport was not charged with racialised and ethnic ascriptions, and would be an ideal tool to promote some kind of a ‘post-racial’ society. Skateboarding was thus connected to the wider narrative around sport as a tool nurturing ‘empowerment’, development and integration (Coalter 2007: 18f.).

In the context of South Africa, such an argument could claim particular importance. Sport had famously been celebrated by Nelson Mandela as a tool to overcome social segregation and divisions inherited from colonialism and the apartheid era. Sport, which had previously been a symptom of and vehicle for the production of a colonial social order, was to be employed to bring about the ‘Rainbow Nation’ after 1994 (Desai 2010: 1). After his election in 1994, Mandela, who was a former amateur pugilist and a big sports fan, recurrently emphasised how sport was supposedly able to ‘heal’ the South African nation. That this role of sport was by no means self-evident became clear when Mandela was booed by an audience in KwaZulu-Natal after calling for support for the Springboks in 1995. Holding up the baseball cap that the team’s captain Francois Pienaar had

previously given to him, he appealed the assembled crowd to identify and solidarise with the Springboks which had acted as a strong symbol of Afrikanerdom during apartheid.¹³ In 2010, South Africa hosted the FIFA World Cup. The mega-event seemed to underline that South Africa was once again a fully recognised part of the international sporting world and that sport events could bring a heterogeneous society together. However, in the course of the preparation and implementation of the FIFA World Cup, class marginalised inhabitants of colour were evicted from metropolitan areas and relocated to poor neighbourhoods on the periphery.¹⁴ The shack settlement Blikkiesdorp, informally known as ‘tin can town’¹⁵, became a material manifestation of such dynamics in Cape Town. In South Africa, sport was not necessarily a harmonious space or a tool nurturing integration, especially when looking at its role during colonial rule and apartheid. Instead, it was entangled with political struggles and severe rifts in the South African society. Employing sport to ‘heal the nation’ turned out to be not a straightforward, but quite a difficult and complex endeavour in post-apartheid South Africa.

Recognising the complex and contradictory role of sports in society, the aim of my research would gravitate towards illuminating what kind of social space skateboarding constitutes from an intersectional perspective through ethnographic and historiographic research, intending a detailed analysis of race, class and gender relations in the sport and subculture (cf. Nicholls/Giles/Sethna 2010: 250; Sherry 2010: 61). Having already explored gender and masculinity studies in greater depth during my Master’s studies of social anthropology and history, and having written my Master’s thesis on gender relations in East German punk rock, I was keen to understand what role gender played in skateboarding, and how the close link between skateboarding and masculinity came about. How and with what consequences was masculinity and male preponderance produced in skateboarding? Why was the number of skateboarding girls and women so small? In this regard, what role did sexism and gender inequalities play inside and outside of the sport and subculture? Furthermore, I sought to contribute to a better understanding of the relevance of race and class, racism and class discrimination in the sport and subculture through my research, and enrich the debate around the value of sport in development cooperation, social work and urban design. What place was skateboarding occupying in apartheid South Africa? To what degree had skateboarding

13 CBC News: The National (09.12.2013): The Real Invictus: How Nelson Mandela united South Africa through sport [video], Youtube, online-source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2U7ZgCMLjHc> [accessed: 14.06.2020].

14 Democracy Now! (01.10.2009): South Africa’s Poor Targeted by Evictions, Attacks in Advance of 2010 World Cup [video], Democracy Now!, online-source: https://www.democracynow.org/2009/10/1/south_africas_poor_targeted_by_evictions [accessed: 15.06.2020].

15 Smith, David (01.04.2010): Life in 'Tin Can Town' for the South Africans evicted ahead of World Cup, The Guardian, online-source: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/apr/01/south-africa-world-cup-blikkiesdorp> [accessed: 16.06.2020].

changed with the transformation to democracy and developed into an integrated social space? To what extent did racism play a role in the sport? To what extent were race and class inequalities of the wider society reproduced or diminished in skateboarding? In what way did cultural, social and structural aspects affect the sport? I intended to pursue these research questions not only in the present, but also by including the historical constitution of sport and skateboarding in South Africa, and address continuities and change regarding race, class and gender.

After unfolding my theoretical and methodological foundation and approach, I turn to the social history of skateboarding in South Africa and broadly chart its development since its popularisation in the 1960s. Because of its close connection of early skateboarding and surfing, I consider surfing's social history in the analysis. Second, I examine the relevance of gender and sexuality in the sport and subculture, paying particular attention to the constitution of skateboarding as a male dominated space, the masculine connotation of the sport and subculture, and the role of homophobia and sexism. Third, I illuminate how race and class related inequalities affected the sport and subculture, and elaborate on how and under which circumstances the sport and subculture could foster integrated social networks and spaces. I will briefly outline below what readers can expect in each chapter.

To contextualise the researched social phenomenon and understand its becoming, the first chapter of this thesis illuminates the historical development of skateboarding in South Africa. As I will demonstrate, skateboarding was carried from North America to South Africa by surfers in the 1960s. Thereby, the social history of surfing is taken into account as it played a fundamental role in shaping early skateboarding and embedding it in the social, economic, political and spatial order of the apartheid society. Early skateboarding was predominantly practised by the White middle and upper class of the South African society until the collapse of the apartheid regime, and it was perceived as a practice connoted with whiteness, masculinity and middle classness, and embedded in the respective social spaces.

An interplay of developments within skateboarding and in society as a whole contributed to changes in how, where and by whom skateboarding was practised. Through the development of new styles, like vert and street skateboarding, the sport was emancipating itself from the beach, and was increasingly oriented towards making use of ramps and concrete environments in South African cities. The sport became accessible to a wider range of the population and became more socially diverse, especially as instruments of racial segregation were dismantled with the fall of the apartheid regime. In this respect, developments in South Africa paralleled the growing race and class diversity of skateboarding in North America and Western Europe, albeit with some delay. By

the late 2010s, skateboarding had undoubtedly become a sport and subculture that reflected the diversity of South African society in terms of race and class.

Similar to skateboarding in other parts of the world, the sport and subculture was strongly masculine connoted, and characterised by a pronounced preponderance of male youth and young men. Looking in detail at the practical aspects of street skateboarding, I trace how masculinity was physically claimed, performed and mediated by skateboarders in urban public space. Bodily challenges and risks that arose from the practice played a key role in the production of masculinity. In the South African context, the confrontation with risks to life and limb resulting from crime and a weak monopoly on the use of force by the state in urban spaces was added to the physically challenging activity. Skateboarding seemed to represent a 'serious game over masculinity' as defined by Bourdieu, in which, under the exclusion and devaluation of women, femininity and effeminate men, skills and traits considered masculine were acquired, performed and mutually acknowledged by boys and men. I argue that skateboarders formed bonds of solidarity due to a shared appreciation and recognition of a specific masculinity produced and proven through skateboarding. In this respect, skateboarding could actually play a role as a youth cultural activity bridging divides based on race, class and nationality by creating a space of loose solidarity for boys and men. However, this masculine communalisation took place at the price of devaluing and excluding girls, women and femininity, as well as gay boys and men. Sexism and homophobia played a present role in South African skateboarding and I pay special attention to these phenomena in a sub-chapter.

In the subsequent chapter, I turn to the significance of the social categories of race and class in South African skateboarding. Sport and subculture both produced socially diverse spaces and networks, with many subcultural members regarding it as particularly open and tolerant in this regard, but also reproduced inequalities and injustices characteristic of the wider society. Racialised class inequalities caused skaters to participate in the sport under very different conditions. The reproduction of racialised inequalities could be observed, as in the wider society, largely on the basis of class differences that overlapped with racialised positions and identities. On a spatial level, residential segregation, which had changed only slightly after 1994, contributed to the reproduction of segregated social networks among skateboarders, even if they partially transgressed socio-spatial divisions in the city. Associated problems and phenomena, such as generally highly unequal living conditions in different neighbourhoods, the unequal access to mobility and therefore access to space, and the high rate of (violent) crime in marginalised neighbourhoods, exacerbated these dynamics. Yet, socially diverse skate spaces developed under certain circumstances. Using the

example of a skatepark in Cape Town and an informal skate spot in Johannesburg, I illuminate in more detail under which circumstances diverse skate spaces could develop. Towards the end of the chapter, I take a closer look at the skateboarding industry and professional skateboarding in South Africa. Racialised class relations became particularly apparent and pronounced in the economic sphere, and made it clear that increasing diversity among practitioners did not necessarily coincide with increasing diversity in the economy. In the economic sphere, it became apparent that the racialised class society¹⁶ was not necessarily equalised, but partly reproduced within the sport and subculture.

With my thesis I intend to contribute to a number of debates. First of all, I aim to enrich the knowledge about a young sport and youth culture that underwent a remarkable development in South Africa. In a typical ethnographic fashion the discussion is also intended to add to wider debates in gender and masculinity studies, urban anthropology and sociology, and the anthropology and sociology of sport. In addition, I aim to contribute to debates about race and class and their entanglement. Overall, this thesis chases a better understanding of the intertwining of gender, class and racial inequalities in their practical, interactive and structural dimensions in South African skateboarding. By examining skateboarding's history and present in South Africa, I contribute to debates in the anthropology and sociology of sport. The focus is on a still young niche sport and subculture whose development had not been sociologically and ethnographically examined in the South African context when I started working on my research project. This thesis is not only intended to partly close this gap, but by highlighting the reproduction and transgression of social inequality relations in skateboarding, I hope to enrich debates about the 'integrative qualities of sports and subcultures' in the wider sense (cf. Coalter 2007: 22f.).

Another important field of literature the thesis is referring to are gender studies and masculinity studies. As a male dominated sport and youth culture, skateboarding was an ideal setting to investigate the constitution of masculine identities through bodily and lifestyle practices among boys and young men in urban (public) spaces. In addition to the physical characteristics of the sport, the particular access to public space in the concrete realities of South African cities turned out to be constitutive. In considering skateboarding as a 'serious game over masculinity' in the spirit of Bourdieu (2005: 93), I explore how masculinity produced through sport and subculture was socially productive insofar as it promoted the development of masculine identities and social ties among boys and (young) men. The role of sexism and homophobia and the interplay of structural and direct

16 In the course of the work, I will refer to the racialised class society recurrently. This refers to a social order in (post)colonial, capitalist societies in which class and race structurally overlap (Mabasa 2022: 231f.; cf. Sullu/Zikhali 2018: 39).

forms of discrimination in the constitution of masculinity also receive attention, and are intended to add to debates in gender and masculinity studies. Moreover, I intend to make a general contribution to the understanding of the (re)production and effects of class inequalities and racism in sport and subcultures, and enrich corresponding debates.

As street skateboarders depended on modern urban architecture and spent much time in urban (public) spaces, an examination of the sport and subculture required to take the realities in South African urban spaces into account. Moreover, due to its ethnographic character, my research approached opened up a specific perspective on general aspects of social life in urban (public) spaces. In this way skateboarding partly served as a methodological tool to approach and experience street life in Cape Town and Johannesburg, adding to conversations in urban anthropology and sociology. In this respect, skateboarding turned out to be an excellent research tool through which urban life and urban architecture could be experienced and observed in a very tangible manner.

2.1 Epistemological and methodological approaches and challenges of ethnographic fieldwork on skateboarding in South Africa

With my study, based on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork, I aimed to explore and illuminate skateboarding, a sport or subculture practised predominantly in urban environments, in the specific context of South African cities, Cape Town and Johannesburg, with its particular societal, political, economical and material conditions and histories. Fundamentally, my research approach aimed towards an ethnography of socio-cultural practices, social relations, knowledges, discourses and institutional structures connected to a cultural artefact, the skateboard (cf. Spradley 1980: 7f.). My investigation could thus be described as typical topic-oriented ethnography (Spradley 1980: 31) using characteristic methods of ethnographic fieldwork, such as participatory long-term observations, formal and informal interviews (Eriksen 2001: 24f.). In this chapter, I will present central epistemological and methodological paradigms of my research approach, and discuss the possibilities and limits of practical feasibility that have emerged in practical implementation.

2.1.1 An approach towards an anthropology of an urban sport and youth culture

While a multitude of works informed my research, I drew particular inspiration for my methodological and theoretical approach from writings of Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant. The

specific value of both author's scholarly work, blurring the disciplinary boundaries between anthropology, sociology and historical sciences, is that it allows a sound analysis of social phenomena under consideration, recognising the entanglement of micro- and macrosociological dynamics (cf. Wilson 2014: 1713). Bourdieu and Wacquant formulated several core paradigms for what they termed reflexive anthropology that acted as an important theoretical and methodological foundation for my research endeavour (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1996). According to this approach, social and material world are regarded as inseparable bound to each other, therefore, separating both spheres in the analysis is epistemologically to be rejected. Society is viewed as an aggregation of historical processes, it is not conceptualised as a 'snapshot' or natural condition of human organisation (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1996: 184). Consequently, every analysis of a social phenomenon has to consult its historical becoming. Because in the process of knowledge generation the researched object is created by the researcher, Bourdieu and Wacquant emphasised that theoretical and methodological approaches can not be separated in the research process, but are interdependent. To avoid a false illusion of objectivity or truth, and to recognise knowledge generation as provisionally, never-ending and never-complete process (ibid. 83), both scholars plead for a comprehensive self-reflection of the social situatedness of the researcher¹⁷ (ibid. 71). Furthermore, reflexive anthropology emphasises the importance of the structural forces of political and economical powers. In particular, this concerns the role of the dominating system of economical production and reproduction, capitalism, and the role of the hegemonic form of political organisation, the nation state, being important fundamentals of present-day societal power relations (cf. Marcus 1995: 97). Accordingly, my research involved the collection of comprehensive qualitative data, especially through ethnographic and historiographic methods, which was then contextualised with historical and secondary data, and related to scientific conversations. The ethnographic part of the study consisted of comprehensive participant observations over a total of 15 months (between 2016 and 2020 in the course of four fieldwork stays), conducting 40 formal, semi-structured, qualitative interviews and countless semi-structured conversations, the production of observation protocols and a field diary, and the software-supported coding and evaluation of the gathered qualitative data (cf. Bell/Aggleton 2012: 800; Gottlieb 2006: 55). Based on the above considerations, I derived further methodological avenues for gathering data, which I will briefly discuss in the following.

17 In a later publication, though, Wacquant deemphasised this aspect, arguing that taking a reflection of the positionality of the researcher in the field too far, characteristic for 'postmodern anthropology' that Wacquant regarded as 'narcissistic', discursive and rather superficial (cf. Binder/Hess 2011: 51f.), distracts from reflecting the construction of the researched phenomena (Wacquant 2013: 29).

2.1.1.1 Comparative sociology of urban inequalities

Because I approached an urban sport and subculture that maintained a characteristically close relationship with (public) urban space, the field of so-called urban anthropology constituted an important frame of reference for this thesis (cf. Hannerz 1980; Gmelch/Zenner 2002 [1988]; Kokot/Bommer 1991; Stevenson 2003). Although urban anthropology implies a kind of artificial exaggeration of the peculiarity of urban spaces¹⁸ and many ethnographic and sociological studies have been carried out in urban spaces without being regarded as urban anthropological in the narrow sense (cf. Stevenson 2003: 19), it provided useful inspiration for linking my research object with more general consideration of societal conditions and developments in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

In my inclusion of urban anthropological and sociological accounts, I distance myself decisively from so-called socio-ecological, Darwinian approaches in the tradition of the Chicago School that still enjoyed quite some popularity in western urban anthropology and sociology of the early 21st century (cf. Abbot 1997: 1154; Burgess 1925; Hannerz 1980: 26f.; Morris 2015: 115, 125), and refer instead to academic currents attempting an historically informed understanding of the social and socio-spatial realities in urban environments (cf. Stevenson 2003: 7). Combined with historically informed works on South African cities, Wacquant's elaborations on urban marginality and socio-spatial polarisation were very helpful to conceptualise the dynamics in South African cities where I was encountering a wide variety of urban areas regarding historical development, demographic composition (i.e. class, race, ethnicity and nationality), infrastructural conditions, economic structure, state presence and public image (cf. Berner 2018a). Wacquant's considerations added considerable depth to the inquiry by adding to reflexive anthropology an emphasised connection of ethnographic research in urban spaces with the analysis of the institutional embeddedness of these spaces (Wacquant 2014: 1701), and by highlighting the influence of symbolic power and the relational position of urban spaces in symbolic space (Wacquant 2014: 1700; cf. Bourdieu/Wacquant 1996: 204). By looking through the methodological and theoretical lens outlined by Wacquant and Bourdieu, and 'fuelling' the approach with debates and insights with works examining issues in South Africa, with a particular focus on developments in Cape Town and Johannesburg, seemed analytically fruitful.

18 From a Marxist perspective, for example, cities can be conceptualised as particularly dense agglomerations of means of production and workers. The densification of materialities and people produces particular social effects (cf. Engels 2017: 48f.; Simmel 1995 [1903]), but does not necessarily imply a qualitative difference of human existence between urban and rural areas. Other authors emphasised that urban life, especially due to the high population density and resulting social effects, exhibits peculiarities that legitimise a separate field of research (Hannerz 1980: 60f., 243).

2.1.1.2 The anthropology of sport and play

Although this study explores various larger anthropological issues, such as gender, class and race inequalities at micro and macro social levels, socio-spatial inequalities in Cape Town and Johannesburg, the appropriation and production of globalised, youth cultural masculine identities at the local level, social life in public spaces, and a critical inquiry of neoliberalisation, all of these issues are framed by a reference to skateboarding. My work in this respect is a typical contribution to the field of the anthropology of sport¹⁹, which not only aims to depict the social constitution of certain sports cultures, but also at carving out general social issues through a research on sports (cf. McGarry 2010: 153f.).

The field of sport anthropology is a relatively young phenomenon. Early works of anthropology considered play, games and sports cursorily, and under an evolutionary paradigm, “from ‘savage’ to ‘civilised’” (Besnier/Brownell 2012: 444, 446). It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that detailed ethnographic research on sport and games emerged, heavily influenced by structural-functionalism (e.g. Geertz 1973; Gluckman 1972; Gmelch 1972), and not until the 1980s that more complex studies were published (McGarry 2010: 152; e.g., Azoy 1982; Blanchard 1981). In the early 1970s, Max Gluckman made some of the first committed attempts at studying sport systematically, football in particular (cf. Gluckman 1972). His student, Victor Turner, well-known for developing the concepts of liminality and *communitas*, may have been inspired by his visits to football games with Gluckman (Heissenberger 2018: 28). In other disciplines of the humanities, in sociology, historical sciences and philosophy, there had been conducted a number of studies on play and game interactions including sport, such as Thorstein Veblen’s (1899) comments on the relevance of sports for class privileged lifestyles, the historical analysis of play by Johan Huizinga (1980 [1949]) and Erving Goffman’s (1972) detailed descriptions of interaction in games. Only in the later 1980s, however, did a field start to take shape that could be called anthropology and sociology of sport (Heissenberger 2018:31; Besnier/Brownell 2012: 445).²⁰ Until today, the production and bridging of

19 In this work, I consider skateboarding to be both a sport and a youth culture. The core of the activity is a sportive physical practice. Even though within skateboarding culture the question of whether skateboarding is a sport has long been controversial, developments and findings in my field research in particular, especially the inclusion of skateboarding in the Olympic Games, the considerable popularisation of competition formats and not least the bodily practice experienced through my practical involvement around the field, suggested that skateboarding could be clearly considered a sport. However, it also included elements that could be framed with the relatively vague terms of sub- and youth-culture that I use referring to Hebdige (1979).

20 A large international, interdisciplinary conference on sport in Seoul in 1988, visited by prominent scholars such as Edith Turner, Ulf Hannerz, Pierre Bourdieu, Arjun Appadurai and Marshall Sahlins, proved that sport can be regarded as a serious object of research, and Appadurai (1995), Bourdieu (1988) and Hannerz (1990) produced articles out of papers presented at the conference in Seoul. It would take another two decades, though, until the anthropological inquiry on sport, meanwhile stimulated by new developments in historical research on sports, would be taken more seriously in the disciplinary mainstream (Besnier/Brownell 2012: 448f.).

social inequalities, the shaping of bodies and minds, the formation of identities through bodily practices, the globalisation and localisation of culture(s), identities and discourses, the stimulation of migration movements, and entanglements of sports with capitalism, nation states, European colonialism and imperialism have established themselves as important topics in ethnographic sports research. The field of anthropology of sport represented an important body of literature underpinning this study with historical, sociological and anthropological studies on skateboarding being of particular relevance.

2.2 A carnal sociological research approach

Moreover, when approaching the research field, I was particularly interested in analytical approaches involving not only the social and cultural, but also the material, physical and bodily aspects of practice. I did not want to completely rely on ‘participatory observation’, but rather to engage actively with the practice and lifeworld around it that formed the core of the social context under consideration. Loïc Wacquant’s carnal sociology, that he had developed during his fieldwork in a boxing gym in Chicago, seemed particularly promising to methodologically ground such an endeavour (Garcia/Spencer 2013: 4; Wacquant 2013: 28). With this approach, the anthropologist actively and intensively engages in the practice under consideration. Inspired by Marcel Mauss’ “body techniques” (Garcia/Spencer 2013: 6), the body is regarded a tool to understand a particular social context, is recognised as a vector of knowledge of the social world and is attributed an active role in the process of ethnographic data collection (cf. Bourdieu 1992: 205; Wacquant 2013: 28f). As Wacquant argued, learning a sport means meticulously internalising physical and mental dispositions (Wacquant 2004: 95), so that the trained body of the anthropologist can become “the spontaneous strategist; it knows, understands, judges, and reacts all at once” (ibid. 97). The researcher consciously strives to ‘go native’, and to assume the role of an observing participant instead of a participating observer. Under heavy investment of time and energy, the researcher becomes fully involved in the practices central in the social space under consideration (Wacquant 2013: 26). In comparison to ‘classical’ forms of participant observation, the focus in this approach is even more on the active participation of the researcher. A great challenge of this method lies in objectifying the experienced, making visible the often unnoticed, unconscious processes of mental and physical dispositioning over time, to truly add depth to the analysis (ibid. 28).

The inclusion of corporeality in the analysis could also be seen in the context of a general trend in the anthropology of sport, in which concepts such as “body culture” have been introduced

(Besnier/Brownell 2012: 449f.; Garcia/Spencer 2013: 6f.; cf. Goffman 1989: 125). This radical integration of the body and its practical use is reminiscent of ethnomethodological approaches, but does not fall into the ethnomethodological shortcomings of an ahistorical approach leaving societal structures and their historical genesis out of the picture (cf. Garfinkel 2002: 126). Wacquant's carnal sociology particularly promised substantial insights and rich ethnographic material with close relation to the practical realities without losing sight of their embeddedness in the wider societal structures. However, the price of such an approach was a considerable extra effort, as practical work on and with the body was added to the research endeavour as a methodological tool.

A number of other works on skateboarding and sports had demonstrated the beneficial impact of practical experiences for a deeper understanding of skateboarding's practical and social realities. Williams (2020) proved in his dissertation that a deep knowledge about the sport is very beneficial when approaching aspects of the sport's history. Having been a skateboarder himself, Williams also exemplified how personal experiences could very much enrich the analytical focus, methodological ambition and depth of analysis, having delivered the first, sound work on racism in American (professional) skateboarding. Ocean Howell's (2005, 2008) works were further examples for a thick, well-informed access towards research on skateboarding, a result of the authors past as a professional skateboarder using his vast amount of practical knowledge to enrich his academic work as an urban planner. Friedel's (2015) book on her work as a skateboard mentor for the NGO Skateistan in Afghanistan proved that physical involvement and participation in the collective play offered insights that remained hidden with passive research approaches. But Friedel's work also demonstrated that such approaches could remain rather superficial when excluding the wider social, cultural and political realities of the illuminated social context.

2.2.1 Learning from 'shallow' research approaches

In the mirror of my own fieldwork experiences, the engagement with works on the sport and subculture of skateboarding also made it clear to me that a lack of consideration of the practical and social realities, and the embeddedness in the wider societal context could have a quite problematic impact on the analysis. Particularly in regards to academic works on skateboarding and its employment in social and developmental work, a larger number of often-cited academic texts were based solely on the analysis of secondary data and media, interviews and sometimes (short-term) passive observations (see for example Atencio/Beal/Wilson 2009; Atencio/Beal/Chivers 2013; Beal 2013; Beal/Wilson 2004; Bradley 2010; Bund 2005; Burmester/Neuber 2015; Dinces 2011; Jones/Graves 2000; Karsten/Pel 2001; L'Auostet/Griffet 2001; Lemmon 2005; Petrone 2010;

Wheaton/Beal 2003). Some of these works even risked reproduction of marketing narratives of the skateboarding industry rather than offering scientific analysis based on a careful consultation of data.

In fact, after a few days of beginning my exploratory research stay in early 2016, about six months before starting my main-fieldwork over a duration of 10 months, I was confronted with potential problems resulting from superficial research approaches in the context of the South African society. Before starting my research in South Africa, I was well aware of Wheaton's (2013) text about the project of a skateboard-NGO that claimed to 'empower' children and youth in a poor Zulu-village in Kwa-Zulu Natal. Several short films, a website and a large number of journalistic pieces could be found online portraying the project, and well-known skateboarding companies acted as corporate social responsibility partners and noted 'skateboarding academic' Iain Borden (2019: 29) echoed Wheaton's overwhelmingly positive account in his 2019 monograph. In her text, Wheaton painted a very positive picture of the organisation, mostly repeating the claims the NGO made to advertise itself in public. But Wheaton had only spend a few days gathering data in South Africa and mostly ignored the wealth of local perspectives, and conducted passive observations at a skatepark in Durban, media analysis and one interview with the owner of the NGO. She seemed to have not visited the actual NGO-site that was about 40 kilometres north of Durban, and had not interviewed children and youth attending the programs (or having attended them), or their parents. Taking into consideration to make this NGO-project a focus of my research project, I attempted to learn more about it on the ground and visited the NGO on two consecutive days in 2016. I was very excited to see the unusual NGO-site myself when I manoeuvred my car over the passes of the beautiful landscape of the 'valley of a thousand hills' and suddenly, elevated on a mountain on the outskirts of a village, I spotted a huge half-pipe. Despite my attempts, meeting the NGO-owner, a White, former professional skateboarder, was not possible, but in an email-exchange prior to my visit I was granted permission to visit the NGO-site and meet the local project manager. However, the project manager only turned up on the second day, so I was able to move freely around the site on the first day and talk to children, young people and young adults that hung around the NGO's skatepark. During the two weekend afternoons I spend there, it became clear that the reality was quite different from the depiction of the NGO-project online and in Wheaton's text. The site was a run-down mess. Children were skating unsupervised on a handful of semi-broken boards, without wearing safety-gear and, in some cases, without wearing shoes. The ramps on the site were in poor condition, some of them not usable at all. The NGO website claimed that there was a computer lab and English classes on the NGO premises, but there was no sign of a computer lab and nobody at the site was

aware of any language workshops. While I was checking out the facility, a young, local man approached me and asked me to sit down to have a chat. We watched the kids skating one of the ramps and had a longer conversation. I learned that the young man, who had grown up in the village, had learned to skate in the NGO but had chosen to give up skateboarding. A while ago, he had broken his leg skating in the park and missed a year of school due to the injury. Moreover, his family had been stuck with the cost of medical treatment, as children and youth using the NGO-site seemed to not be insured, and had therefore forbidden him to skateboard any further. According to the young man, among the villagers the attitude towards the NGO project was ambivalent, by no means solely positive. The romantic image of a skateboarding project ‘empowering’ poor children and youth, in the countryside, as Wheaton had depicted it, seemed not to correspond to reality. Things were much more complex. On the second day, the local project manager, a man in his early 20s from the village, showed up and gave me a small tour through the NGO’s premises. He was visibly intoxicated, trying to overplay his condition as he delivered an absurd performance by narrating a buzzword-heavy, romantic story about the NGO-program that was in obvious contradiction to what was surrounding us and what I had learned the day before. I left the NGO project feeling irritated and needed a few days to process what I had seen. Coincidentally, I met two other key informants in Durban, a few days after visiting the NGO. An European young woman, Petra²¹, on a volunteering trip in South Africa who had got to know the NGO-owner and conducted an art workshop for the NGO, and a young man, Nkosiyabo, who had grown up in the Zulu village, had helped the NGO-owner to build up the project and had been part of the program from the beginning, but had cut ties with the NGO deeply disappointed after a few years and was working as a barkeeper in Durban when I met him. Both had a devastating opinion of the NGO project. According to them, the owner would dress up the project when journalists, film crews or sponsors visited, but outside of such occasions he neglected the project and did not care about the children and young people in the village. Nkosiyabo accused the NGO-owner of having systematically lining his own pockets: Many donations to the project had supposedly never arrived, but, instead, had been sold in a skate shop run by the NGO-owner who had accumulated quite some wealth over the years (and had moved to Cape Town). In a facebook chat after my visit to Durban, Nkosiyabo emphasised his accusations by mentioning how, in his view, even the US-American pro-skateboarder Tony Hawk had been deceived by the NGO:

21 The names of interview partners and other informants are anonymised throughout this work. In some cases, when dealing with individuals of public relevance, real names are used.

Interviewer: Hey, I hope you are alright! I am back in Germany since Monday. Just received this new article and video on [the NGO-site]. It is really unbelievable what an overly positive image they create through the media. Pictures and some video parts are probably quite a few years old (Tony Hawk was there in 2009?). Best, Hans

Nkosiyabo: Hey brother, good to hear from you, all good this side. yah i know it's crazy how they advertise themselves in front of TV's and Magazines but in real life nothing much is happening. They display a different picture even in front of Tony Hawk cause they know how important it is for them to use him.

Interviewer: good to hear that you are well! crazy world. it is such a sad story with the [NGO], still thinking about this quite a bit, I didn't expect to find something like this during my research. you mean things were staged when Tony Hawk was visiting?

Nkosiyabo: Yah by [the NGO-owner]. to convince Tony hawk that there is a huge project going yet it's just him scooping all the cash.

I could understand that Nkosiyabo and a number of other locals felt used by the social entrepreneur. According to them, the NGO owner appeared to be making a good profit by publicly selling the image of a project helping the locals, without this actually happening or the locals being fairly involved. Moreover, shortly after the skateboarding entrepreneur had introduced skateboarding to the village, a tragedy occurred when, according to Nkosiyabo, a boy suffered a deadly collision with an oncoming vehicle when skating down a hill. The family was supposedly never compensated and the story was kept quiet by the NGO.²²

This first case I encountered showed me early on that a closer look, especially regarding the projects of NGOs and other commercial players, could raise complex and controversial issues. When returning to South Africa for my long-term fieldwork stay in late 2016, I decided against following the case in KwaZulu Natal in more detail, especially due to reservations to end up conducting a quasi-colonial type of ethnography, doing research on the impact of an NGO in a Zulu-village as a White European, and focused on skateboarding in Cape Town and Johannesburg instead, where I aimed to get to know a high diversity of societal contexts and incorporated some selected NGOs in my fieldwork. But this case, which I encountered immediately after starting my research, made it clear to me that, especially in a divided and complex society like South Africa, I had to make great efforts to gain a sound picture of things by involving a wide spectrum of different perspectives. Particularly in the world of commercial skateboarding and social entrepreneurialism it was of importance to gain insights into the backstages. Otherwise, I would risk repeating glossy

²² The death of a skateboarding boy from the village was also mentioned in a youtube video of US skateboarder Mike Valley: Mike Valley (09.08.2020): DRIVE starring Mike Valley: Beyond Borders Part 2 (2004) [video], Youtube, online-source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8e6JVmaTpE> [accessed: 06.06.2023]).

marketing narratives or only getting to know rather one-sided perspectives on controversial topics. I concluded that I needed a time- and energy-intensive approach with active, longer-term participation to collect data for a sound analysis.

2.2.2 Engaging in apprenticeship

In order to get an understanding of the practical experiences that skaters made and the happenings in spaces where skateboarding happened, it was advantageous for various reasons to actively ride a skateboard myself. In practice, this was easier said than done as becoming a skateboarder demands self-discipline, bodily fitness, bravado and pain resistance, and a lot of time. The wooden board with two axes and four wheels is a very delicate vehicle requiring precise movements of the body at all times. Brief inattention and even a pebble on the ground can quickly make one fall and lead to painful injuries, like sprained ligaments, broken bones and concussions, when riding a skateboard. Practically exploring skateboarding as a non-skateboarder and committing myself to the practice was therefore challenging. I considered myself lucky to quickly meet highly experienced, knowledgeable and dedicated skateboarders in Johannesburg and Cape Town, some of whom took on a mentoring role towards me, and supported me in developing abilities and understanding the pillars of the sport. Shortly after my arrival in late 2016, I was introduced by my landlord in Troyville, Johannesburg, to Ayusch, a local skateboarding veteran who made a living as a self-employed trader of skateboarding equipment. One week later, Ayusch had assembled a skateboard for me and we were ‘missioning out’ together for the first time. Ayusch became a very important informant for me in Johannesburg, because he not only seemed to know the whole skate scene, but the whole scene also knew him. And because he was living off selling equipment and delivering it in person to skateboarders in the city, he met other skateboarders all the time. He was a walking history book who openly expressed his opinion, also and especially concerning controversial aspects like race, class and gender inequalities that he had observed daily since almost two decades. In the early 1990s he had started skateboarding as a kid, never stopped and lived from trading skate equipment since he had finished his art studies at the university, but had a hard time finding employment in the competitive creative economy. For hours he could tell anecdotes about the history of skateboarding in Johannesburg. His knowledge of public life and architecture of inner-city Johannesburg was impressively detailed. For him it was crystal clear that I would have to ride a board myself, if I want to understand and write about skateboarding, and he became some sort of mentor to me introducing me to the city, the sport and to other skaters. In Cape Town, it was especially Arnold ‘Arnie’ Lambert, whom I met by chance at a skateboarding event and who, as a

skate veteran, walking skateboarding history book, critical observer and athlete who had experienced the sport before and after 1994, was able to give me a lot of valuable insights and practical tips to improve my skating. In the course of my research, it was a larger number of skaters from different walks of life and social backgrounds whom I spent time and went on 'skating missions' with that helped me understand the practical aspects, and history and present of skateboarding in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Active skateboarding brought many insights I would certainly have not gained otherwise. Most obviously, it allowed me to at least partially develop a skateboarder's habitus, to understand the fundamentals of the practical experience and the fine details skateboarders regarded relevant in their performances. It also allowed me to participate in the social interaction and avoid the role of a passive bystander when spending time among skaters. Especially when dealing with children and young people, skating was often a door opener because it did quickly 'break the ice'. In fact, spending time with street skateboarders occasionally required me to skate, as the skaters used their skateboards to travel through the city. It would have been impossible to follow them on such trips on foot, by car or by public transport. Furthermore, engaging in skateboarding allowed me to better understand how the skaters perceived and experienced the city as a social and architectural space (cf. Lee/Ingold 2006). This was crucial, for example, to understand the particular relevance (and irrelevance) of some spots and parks, and of urban architecture more generally, but also to better understand how the skaters handled challenges they encountered in public. Certain survival strategies, like reading urban environments to identify trouble in advance, grouping up to create volatile safe spaces, navigating heavy traffic, negotiating with other city dwellers over the use of certain architecture, and dressing in the right way to reduce the risk of getting mugged, very much became apparent to me by practically and actively joining skateboarders in their activities. Other practices showed that witnessing public life and 'playing' with certain phenomena of city life had its own adventurous appeal for the skaters. Besides the actual skateboarding, a variety of practices and characteristic experiences turned out to be significant, no less of a physical nature.

When spending time at skateparks, skate spots and some NGO-programs, active participation was especially important and my research would have taken on a very different quality if I had remained a purely passive observer. At times, it would have put me in an uncomfortable and unfavourable role. Imagining myself as a White European man in his early 30s sitting passively on the sides of skateparks, watching kids and young adults skate, seemed out of the question to me. By skating myself, I could instead participate in the action, become an active participant in the game and occupy a more comfortable role in the social contexts I wanted to investigate. Moreover, active

skating greatly facilitated contact with other skaters, especially children and young people, and it was sometimes a necessity to gain access to important sites of the field and to get in touch with some well-seasoned skateboarders (cf. Heissenberger 2018: 61). In some cases it seemed that only when I proved basic skateboarding skills and a willingness to improve them, I became an ‘accepted’ presence and was regarded a trustworthy conversation partner. In other words, I had to express certain subcultural virtues and an ‘authentic’ interest in the activity to be granted access to certain spheres of the skateboarding scene or qualify myself as a conversational partner (cf. Bourdieu 1976: 16; Bourdieu 2005: 93f.). And of course, active skateboarding was the prerequisite to understand the appeal and challenges of the sport, and experience the joys, adrenaline rushes, fears, frustrations and painful falls skaters were familiar with.



Illustration 1: In late 2016, I was photographed in Sea Point, Cape Town, engaging in a weekly cruising and mellow downhill session of skateboarders, longboarders and inline skaters.

2.2.3 Limits of apprenticeship

Therefore, for the duration of my fieldwork, practical skateboarding formed an important and time-consuming aspect. Yet, as much as active skateboarding was beneficial to the quality of my ethnographic research project, conducting anthropological research was not a good starting position to become a skilled skateboarder. Although I became a confident rider during my research and I put serious effort into increasing my abilities, I did not master the fundamentals and advanced techniques of street skateboarding, ollieing (jumping) and performing tricks on obstacles. My motivation and my time to learn tricks was rather small compared to the energy invested into producing an ethnography. Apart from meeting skaters and visiting skate spaces, I spent much time writing down my observations in my fieldwork diary, researching and reading literature and documents, and arranging, conducting and transcribing interviews than on improving my skate skills. In between my four fieldwork stays, I juggled extensive teaching assignments at an urban sociology institute in Germany and work on my dissertation. While some of my skateboarding informants invested extensive amounts of time in improving their abilities on a skateboard in between meetings, I only occasionally used my skateboard outside the field, sometimes to the dissatisfaction of my mentors in Cape Town and Johannesburg that saw little progress of my skateboarding skills.

Two other, major issues spoke against a more dedicated approach towards active skateboarding: the relatively high risk of injury in skateboarding, and my age of 32 at the start of field research, unusually old for someone to start skateboarding (cf. Goffman 1989: 128). As I show in the course of the thesis, the increased risks of injury played a central role in the constitution of masculinity through skateboarding. For myself, this required accepting minor injuries such as scrapes, bruises and sprains as a part of my fieldwork. However, due to my already advanced age and work obligations, I shied away from manoeuvres associated with higher risk of injury. Despite my cautious approach, the price for implementing a carnal sociological methodology was a fracture. A few weeks before ending my research stay in 2017, I broke my left wrist, had to undergo surgery in Johannesburg and spent a month among skateboarders with my left hand in plaster, forcing me into a passive role for the remaining weeks of my fieldwork. A shining scar will remind me of carnal sociological research approach among skateboarders in South Africa until the end of my days. Cynically, even fracturing my wrist brought insights. It taught me how high the price could be when losing control on a skateboard (cf. Heissenberger 2018: 62) and what difficulties it caused to traverse urban public space in South Africa with one arm in a cast. Moreover, I learned what recognition one could get in the world of skateboarding when one could prove the ruthless

instrumentalisation of the body through a more severe injury. Serious injuries and scars could act very much like a trophy in parts of the skate scene, symbolising comprehensive commitment, devotion and dedication to the practice (cf. Atencio/Beal/Wilson 2009: 10; Berner 2016). The selfless commitment, the sacrifice of the body actually turned out to be one central element for the performance and constitution of masculinity.

Yet, despite putting my body on the line for my research endeavour, I had not become a ‘real skateboarder’, a full participant of the sport and subculture under consideration. This represented an important difference from Wacquant’s fieldwork experience who was able to become a recognised amateur pugilist. Particularly, in architectural and social spaces where skateboarding was practised at a high skill level I could hardly actively participate and mingle among the practitioners. In these situations, my lack of skill occasionally forced me into the role of a bystander, a passive observer. Sometimes, this was reinforced by a discouraging and intimidating atmosphere resulting from the latent elitism of advanced skateboarders. Although skateboarding was often said to be a purely individual sport that does not involve direct competition like other sports and allows individual expression (cf. O’Connor 2016: 34), social pressures to conform to a certain standard did play a role in collectively used skate spaces (cf. Petrone 2010: 122f.). Some skateparks were even known to be especially exclusive, male dominated spaces where acceptance was bound to an advanced level of skating abilities. Despite the attempt to dedicate myself to the practice during the field research, certain avenues, experiences and contacts in the field remained closed to me.

I could not always avoid falling into the role of a passive observer. Some skateparks and skate spots were simply not usable for me, as they required advanced skills. When spending time with skateboarders in poor neighbourhoods it was quite often the case that a number of children would join us, ‘check out’ the urban athletes and ask if they could use one of our boards. I seldom had the hard-heartedness that devoted skateboarders often had to refuse such requests.²³ Instead, I resigned myself to sitting on the side and letting the children enjoy themselves using my skateboard. Being a passive observer brought its own challenges, such as being exposed to the dust and cold of the Johannesburg winter, but unlike skateboarders, not finding warmth in the movement, or being more approachable by strangers with sometimes doubtful intentions in urban public space. On the other hand, not actively participating in the skate-game brought additional insights. I was able to have

23 Experienced South African skateboarders I have met often refrained from lending their boards to children and young people they met in public. First, the skaters treated their skateboards like musicians treated their instruments. Their board was a precisely adjusted, precious machine that could wear out quickly when used. Leaving it to strangers was therefore unusual. Secondly, dedicated skaters didn’t want to waste time sitting on the sidelines passively when they wanted to skate themselves. And thirdly, skaters feared the theft of their skateboard, because a child who couldn’t resist the temptation to own the desired toy could simply ride away in a brief moment of inattention.

deeper conversations with skaters on the sides and make detailed observations of aspects I would have hardly perceived while skating myself. Not only did skateboarders take recurring breaks in their sessions, chilling was an explicit part of the skateboarding experience. In well-attended skateparks there was always a number of skaters sitting at the sidelines, chatting, sharing drinks and food, watching skate videos on their phones, adjusting their equipment, or just fooling around. Talking to spectators and uninvolved individuals in the vicinity of skate spots, such as passers-by, shopkeepers, street vendors, homeless people, security guards or residents in the neighbourhood, could also be very informative. Taking on the role of a passive observer and a non-skateboarder was therefore beneficial in some situations.

A central challenge during fieldwork was the tense security situation in Cape Town and Johannesburg. South Africa was considered one of the most unequal societies in the world regarding the distribution of wealth. Since the end of apartheid in 1994, economic inequality had increased rather than decreased (Sulla/Zikhali 2018: xv; Seekings 2011: 28). The persistent and deepening economic inequalities in South Africa and the enormous plight of marginalised classes excluded from lucrative sectors of the formal labour market were spawning informal and criminal economies as well as various forms of violent contact crime (cf. Samara 2011: 188; Anderson 1999: 32; Van Niekerk et. al. 2015: 2). Due to the high number of muggings, car-hijackings, robberies and homicides, some areas of Cape Town and Johannesburg were counted among the most dangerous places in the world (Van Niekerk et. al. 2015: 1; Vigneswaran 2014: 472). I will elaborate later on what consequences these conditions had for skateboarders in South Africa. In any case, the crime problem complicated my research considerably. Safe mobility turned out to be a central resource and overall some planning was always needed if I wanted to meet skaters in public spaces I was not familiar with.

Due to the crime problem in public²⁴ and the questionable public transport infrastructure, I decided to rent a car and it became my primary means of transport during fieldwork.²⁵ Unlike most marginalised skateboarders, I enjoyed a very privileged transportation situation, not having to rely on public transport, Uber, or skating from A to B. Often I met up with skateboarders in urban areas, using my car to get there, or I picked them up and we drove to places of interest together. In parts of Johannesburg and Cape Town my research would have been very difficult to put into practice

24 Initially I moved around Johannesburg on foot and in Cape Town I tried cycling for a while. However, mugging situations I got into quickly showed me the limits of such an approach.

25 The automobile infrastructure created under apartheid was still an important pillar of spatial segregation, because it structurally demobilised the marginalised. The car was the most important machine for the privileged classes to travel in relative safety between privatised islands of security (cf. Pirie 1992). Due to my contacts with skaters of different class positions, I became very aware of the importance of mobility for the socio-spatial relations.

without a car, as I visited privileged and marginalised areas alike, and relying on public transport was much more time intensive than relying on automobility. Additionally, I would have exposed myself to a much higher risk of becoming a victim of violent crime. The practical challenges of trying to implement carnal sociology, therefore, went far beyond the actual practice that was constitutive of the social space I wanted to investigate. However, as became apparent precisely through this attempt, these contextual and, in a sense, lapidary aspects of urban public life in South Africa played a central role in the social space under consideration.

2.3 Contextualising ethnographic data

Furthermore, my ethnographic research involved manifold activities not (directly) related to skateboarding and to get insights into the everyday life of the skaters was of special value. Visiting skateboarders at home or at work, and spending free time outside skateboarding activities often told me far more about their identities, lifestyles and life situations than an interview would have been able to. I tried to get in touch with skaters from as many different social positions as possible. I was led to a wide variety of neighbourhoods in Cape Town and Johannesburg. Sometimes within one day I was visiting radically differing social contexts regarding their respective economic standing. Jumping back and forth between all different lifeworlds was an insightful experience enriching my fieldwork, elucidating the immediate effects of inequality on the lives of city dwellers, and the variety of lifestyles under drastically differing circumstances.

I attempted to contextualise my experiences in different urban spaces by consulting further information. A further central element of my research consisted of following wider public debates and political developments. Policy documents formed an insightful source to better understand past and present views, models, predictions and interventions of the national government, the city governments and economic actors. Statistical data released by the South African government provided particularly insightful data regarding the development of social conditions and socio-spatial inequalities over time. For example, the South African census enabled to map change and reproduction of racialised class segregation (cf. Lahola 2012). By consulting such 'metadata', I was able to better understand the social contexts and urban areas in which I was conducting research among skateboarders.

Before, during and after conducting ethnographic fieldwork I attentively followed media discourses relevant to the research field, using qualitative content analysis to integrate media into my research (Schreier 2014). This included general debates and developments in South Africa, Cape Town and

Johannesburg, and the world of skateboarding and skateboard NGOs. Especially social media and online video platforms turned out to be very important, they formed a central pillar of communication for the South African and global skateboarding world. Due to that, I gained first impressions of the research field, and I was sometimes able to identify interesting sites of interests, potential interview partners and NGO-programs, even before setting a physical foot in the research field. Since my social media connections and my knowledge about important media platforms was growing during fieldwork, following skateboarding related media online and looking up the social media presence of individual skateboarders, crews, companies, NGOs and neighbourhood groups became a permanent aspect during my ethnographic research. Even after fieldwork ended I followed developments in the field online and maintained contact to informants via social media which enabled me to ask evolving follow up questions.

Films, short films and clips composed a separate entity of media in the field that was of particular importance. Skateboarders, skateboard companies and NGOs invested considerable effort into video production. For them, films and videos were the most important medium to generate mediated, powerful representations in the public sphere advertising themselves, their products or the products of sponsors. During fieldwork, watching videos and films in company of skateboarders, sometimes on a smartphone in the streets, was a typical occurrence. Informants introduced me to videos and films that were of importance to them, or asked me to watch particular videos at home. Accordingly, watching, coding and interpreting skateboard films and videos, and advertisement films of companies and NGOs were part of the research process before, during and after ethnographic fieldwork.

Moreover, to better understand the genesis of skateboarding as a social space, I undertook historiographic research on the history of skateboarding in South Africa by working through historical skateboarding and surfing magazines, and videos in public and private archives. Furthermore, I tried to situate skateboarding in the wider field of sport and free time activities by consulting literature of relevance. Surfing magazines, specifically the South African Surfer and ZigZag, constituted informative primary sources about South African skateboarding between the 1960s and 1990s. In 1997, the country's first skateboard magazine, blunt, was published. In 2002, it was supplemented and later replaced by Session Skateboard Magazine. Both magazines represented important historical sources that I could access archives in the National Libraries of Pretoria and Cape Town, and in private archives of skateboarders. Until the democratisation of the media sphere through widespread availability of technology for communication and media production in South Africa generally, the medially archived history of skateboarding first and foremost represented the

commercialised, economically privileged, and therefore White sphere of skateboarding history. The history of Black, Coloured and Indian skateboarding in South Africa, on the other hand, was almost completely absent in these publications until the late 1990s. In my research, I faced the same problem as Neftalie Williams encountered in his historical research on skateboarders of colour in the US (Williams 2020: 32). The common problem of the absence of the marginalised in (South African) archived historical sources thus also played a role when uncovering the social history of a small sports and youth culture (cf. Hamilton 2015: 103f.). It was for this reason, that part of my ethnographic research entailed learning about skateboarding history from older skateboarders through conversations, talking over old photos, video tapes and magazine cuttings, and digging up old equipment. Some skateboarders had cultivated larger collections of skateboarding memorabilia related to their personal histories, or to skateboarding history of the country. Writing a history of skateboarding in South Africa since the 1960s was consequently a complex research endeavour on its own, regarding the vast amount of potential witnesses, sources and oral histories. Yet, consulting the historical development of the sport in South Africa constituted an important background to situate and interpret my data. It allowed me to better understand the social relations in South African skateboarding in the mirror of their historical development.

2.4 An intersectional approach: class, race and gender in the analysis

As I attempted an intersectional analysis of skateboarding focusing on the relevance of gender, class and race, I furthermore built my analysis in reference to gender and masculinity studies, racism research and critical race theory, critical whiteness studies, and on debates addressing class inequalities in capitalist societies, especially debates discussing the overlap of class and race. In the following, I would like to make a few general remarks that clarify my approach towards the analysis and conceptualisation of the social categories of race, class and gender.

Class emerged as a particularly relevant social category among South African skateboarders, which is why I paid close attention to it in the analysis. I understand class as a social position resulting from the relation of people to the production means in a society. In this sense, class inequalities result from the material reality and societal order 'organising' the unequal distribution of resources to individuals and groups (Bourdieu 1987: 196; Harvey 2001: 79; Marx 2011: 539). Class position as an expression of individual's access to existential resources fundamentally affects all areas of life, like the access to living space, food, medical care, education, mobility, protection from

violence and so on. As later intellectuals added to Marx' conceptualisation, class does also involve socio-cultural and ideological aspects in its constitution and reproduction (Morrell 2001b: 14). Thorstein Veblen was famous for his detailed analysis of the lifestyle of the so-called 'leisure class' in the USA in 1899, emphasising how class privilege is lived and performed by not only an abstention from (manual) labour, but by outright lavish lifestyle practices and a wasteful treatment of resources performed in the public sphere. In contrast, class marginalisation is characterised by the need to work manually and, because resources are scarcely available, a frugal, pragmatic lifestyle (Veblen 1899: 29ff.). Pierre Bourdieu expanded the Marxist conception of capital to include a cultural dimension and argued that the class position in modern capitalist societies results not only from economic but also from social, cultural and symbolic capital. Access to these forms of capital, whose unequal distribution in society as a whole produces the class structure, determines the respective class position (Bourdieu 1987: 196). Access to resources determines the scope of opportunities, which causes a differentiation of lifestyles in society along class lines. The lifestyles differences contribute to the reproduction of class inequalities in the socio-cultural sphere (Wilson 1990: 159). Consequently, class is thought as being co-constituted by socio-economic and socio-cultural dynamics in society. Due to the material basis of the class hierarchy, ascents and descents in the class hierarchy are possible for individuals in the course of their lives. However, the class structure of society as a whole is subject to inertia and is reproduced intergenerationally. In addition to considering class relations in society as a whole, those within skateboarding also play an important role in the analysis. In my analysis of the social microcosm of skateboarding, I thus address not only the immediate relevance of class inequalities, but also their historical formation and perpetual reproduction (Bourdieu 1987: 129). In this way, I address an overall social dilemma of post-apartheid South Africa in the context of the sport and subculture of skateboarding.

The social category race, unlike class, has not a material, but an ideological core (cf. Hall 2002: 42). Races were 'invented' in the course of European colonialism and imperialism, and have therefore always been ideological constructions, transfigured into a biological phenomenon in the name of science, especially in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Harrisson 1995: 52; Sow 2008: 73f.). Yet, despite the attempts of racist ideologues and (pseudo-)scientists to fixate race categories, they remained blurry, contested, fragile and contradictory (Bonnet 2000: 8; Guess 2006: 653; Hall 2002: 56). However, because of their active mobilisation and institutionalisation, they became socio-culturally and materially inscribed into societies (Magubane 1979: 3). Moreover, racism fulfilled an ideological function as a moral legitimisation of oppression and exploitation in the colonies (Biko

1987 [1978]: 68f.; Magubane 1996: 147; Mbembe 2019: 25f.; Robinson 2021: 27; Zondi 2021: 224).

A racist societal order was laid out in South Africa with the European colonisation beginning in 1652 with the arrival of White Europeans led by Jan van Riebeeck. This order, which, taking shape over time, ideal-typically placed Whites at the top and non-Whites at the bottom pervaded Dutch and British colonial rule, albeit in slightly different ways in different times and contexts (Feinstein 2005: 51; Magubane 1979: 32; Terreblanche 2002: 159). In the South African Union and under the apartheid regime, the racist order was increasingly institutionalised and formalised, involving spatial segregation of the population, political disfranchisement of the country's non-White majority, and the institutionalisation of deep racialised injustices in all aspects of life (Magubane 1996: 27; Steyn 2012: 8). Yet, the race categories mobilised were rather blurry. Even the apartheid state with its efforts to define the categories with pseudo-objective, bureaucratised procedures did not change this. It is well known that the bureaucratic attribution of racialised identities, through methods such as the pencil test, produced arbitrary, pseudo-biological distinctions. Under certain circumstances, already categorised persons could even be reclassified (Noah 2016: 119). Moreover, ascribed identities did not necessarily coincide with the identification of the self or perception of individuals by their social surrounding, causing much misery among families and relatives being torn apart by the implementation of apartheid policies (Posel 2011: 355f.). For example, the 1950 Population Registration Act, categorising the population according to the set racial categories, defined the distinction between White and Coloured individuals on the basis of vague social ascriptions:

“[...] a white person [is] one who in appearance is, or who is generally accepted as, as white person, but does not include a person who, although in appearance obviously a white person, is generally accepted as a coloured person.” (Posel 2011: 333)

Therefore, race categories, despite being ideologically sustained as biological categories, in South African apartheid law were based on a ‘racist common sense’, building on and emphasising historically grown racialised social distinctions. Because it was implicitly recognised as a social construction, and a fragile and fluid concept, the state was mobilised to define, stabilise and anchor racialised inequalities in the real world (Posel 2011: 336). As a variant of the divide and rule strategy, the apartheid regime furthermore institutionalised differences within race categories. The Black population was ‘expatriated’ into homelands and divided into ‘tribes’ (Posel 2011: 350;

Reihling 2020: 24; Robinson 1992: 297). The injustices of the racist regime produced real inequalities and distinctions among the population according to its logic. Race was inscribed in the South African society in complex ways, leaving a deep, lasting mark on social, cultural, political, economic and religious spheres of life. In this respect, ‘race’ acquired a material, tangible dimension, which, however, ran along fuzzy racialised categorisations (cf. Noah 1996: 54).

The race categories institutionalised during apartheid survived the end of the apartheid regime. Controversially discussed regarding the reproduction of racialised inequalities and stereotypes, the South African government was still referring to the old racialised categories, for example, in demographic surveys and in the implementation of controversial policy instruments, such as Black Economic Empowerment. In my analysis, I attempt to describe racialised dynamics, referring to racialised categories commonly used in South Africa²⁶, and at the same time consider these categories as socially constructed, historically grown and institutionalised products of a social order. As Stuart Hall put it, the history of colonialism makes it impossible to consider the development of (European) racism without considering the unfolding of European capitalism (Hall 1994: 92; cf. Robinson 2021: 26f., 81). Racism, and economic exploitation and disenfranchisement of the native population went hand in hand in the European colonies (Mabasa 2022: 231; Magubane 1979: 3). As Du Bois had argued, it was Black labour that was a primary resource for the rise of the European powers and for the industrialisation of Europe. Fanon had called racism a “superstructure” forming the foundation of European colonial exploitation leading to an overlap of race and class positions in colonial societies (Grosfoguel 2022: xvi). An important supplier of diamonds and gold, the exploitation of Black labour played a central role in South Africa’s history (Magubane 1996: 277; Mbembe 2008a: 13f.). Under colonial rule and apartheid, a wide overlap of race and class positions was produced. Class positions hereby mirrored positions in the racist hierarchy, placing Whites on the top and Blacks at the bottom (Butler 2011: 54; Legassick/Hemson 1976: 4; Morrell 2001a: 16f.; Natrass/Seekings 2011: 551). This racialised social order ensured the exploitation of Black workers (Natrass/Seekings 2011: 520, 529f.). Magubane spoke of a ‘dual labour market’ in which well-paid, clean work was reserved for Whites and exploitative, dirty and hard work for Blacks (Magubane 1979: 21; cf. Noah 2016: 23). South Africans classified as Indian, Asian and Coloured were predominantly placed in-between these two spheres of work (Legassick/Hemson 1976: 5). The racialisation of social relations was thus also fostered by linking racialised positions to spaces of opportunity emerging from class positions. Race was made an articulating principle of social, political and ideological structures, underpinned by the simultaneous invocation of free and forced

²⁶ These categories primarily comprise the attributions Black, Coloured, White, Indian and Asian, which have been used by the state since apartheid for the racialised categorisation of its population.

labour (Hall 1994: 93). The racial capitalism (Robinson 2021: xiv; cf. Mabasa 2022: 228f.) nurtured by the apartheid regime brought a lasting materialisation of racialised categories, fundamentally shaping the access to freedoms and opportunities of the population (Biko 1987: 96; Magubane 1979: 1f.; Seekings 2011: 22). A racialised class society emerged in which being Black, being workingclass overlapped as much as being White and being middle class.

Paradoxically, the attempt to spatially segregate the population on the basis of racialised categorisations developed from the fact that the exploitation of Black labour for the gain of Whites was not possible without a spatial approximation of the racialised groups. It was precisely because Whites and Blacks were brought together in cities, the centres of economic production, that desires for racial segregation were awakened among parts of the White population (Legassick/Hemson 1976: 4, 6; Mabin 1991: 34ff.). The prosperous cities were to remain White dominated spaces with the Black population being segregated to the periphery or allowed only temporary residence as workers through the migrant labour system (Magubane 1979: 122f.). As Trevor Noah had fittingly described:

“The ultimate goal of apartheid was to make South Africa a white country, with every black person stripped of his or her citizenship and relocated to live in the homelands, the Bantustans, semi-sovereign black territories that were in reality puppet states of the government in Pretoria. But this so-called white country could not function without black labor to produce its wealth, which meant black people had to be allowed to live near white areas in the townships, government-planned ghettos built to house black workers, like Soweto.” (Noah 2016: 23)

Only in the course of the 1980s and 1990s, ushering in the end of apartheid, were corresponding laws abolished (Mabin 1991: 41f.) and South African cities like Johannesburg and Durban started to undergo changes regarding the racialised class segregation. Yet, the racialised class society largely survived the end of apartheid. While new opportunities for advancement into the middle and upper classes emerged for a small segment of the previously oppressed, racialised injustices and racialised residential segregation were reproduced by the neoliberal state, a process termed as ‘neo-apartheid’ or ‘class apartheid’ by some authors (Bond 2004: 47f.; Mabasa 2022: 229; Natrass/Seekings 2011: 519; Robinson 1992: 301). Although South Africans of colour had gained full civil rights, the racialised class society had not been fundamentally shattered (Mbembe 2008a: 9f.; Sulla/Zikhali 2018: 49; Terreblanche 2002: 58). In fact, income and wealth inequality stagnated or even increased in South Africa after 1994 (Bond 2004: 47; Malukele 2019: 2). Being Black and being poor remained as synonymous as being White and being affluent (Bond 2004: 53; Malukele 2019: 27;

Robins 2008: 167; Sulla/Zikhali 2018: 39). And some cities, like Cape Town, had experienced an increase and not decrease of racialised class segregation after transformation (Fleming 2011; Visser/Kotze 2008: 2585). In democratic South Africa, it was no longer an authoritarian state that imposed a racist order, but a neoliberalised state that allowed the reproduction and amplification of racialised inequalities through class inequalities (Allen 2006: 193; Hendler 1991: 201f.; Mbembe 2008a: 16f.):

“Apartheid served to transform the state-imposed privileges of being white into the advantages of class that were rewarded by markets, ensuring that the white elite became a middle class whose continued privileges no longer depended on active racial discrimination.” (Seekings 2011: 29)

The overlap of race and class was not only perpetuated structurally and spatially, but also socio-culturally, boundaries running along this overlap remained highly relevant. Although considerable new freedoms had undoubtedly emerged and lifestyles were able to break out of the rigid barriers of racialised lifeworlds, racialised class distinctions continued to play a central role in the ‘rainbow nation’. With informants, I repeatedly got into conversations about race and class in South Africa. The reproduction of injustices and the persistence of racist ideology, in other words, the material, cultural and psychological effects of the apartheid past (cf. Mabasa 2022: 232), were issues often brought to the table by informants and in the wider public. I will pay more attention to the reproduction, transformation and discussion of racialised inequalities and segregation in the corresponding chapter, as it turned out that they fundamentally affected South African skateboarding. Because of the considerations made above, my analysis of race and class collapses into one chapter. There I will shed light on the interaction and mutual reproduction of race and class in the context of South African skateboarding. For the description of inequalities and injustices I observed and learned about from informants, I will refer to race and class categories commonly and officially used in South Africa, and regard those categories as socially constructed ascriptions with meaningful consequences in daily social interactions. All racialised categories are capitalised in the text to emphasise their socially constructed nature. As far as possible, racialised positions and attributions refer to the self-classification of the respective persons and groups.

In my intersectional analysis, gender, alongside race and class, is the central social category of consideration. I view gender relations from a constructivist perspective as the ideological structuring of society into a dichotomous system that distinguishes between men and women, produced by an institutionally ordered system of practices. From this perspective, gender identities

are not the result of a “natural” expression of human existence based on biological mechanisms inscribed in the body, even though bodily differences play a part in the formation of the gender order, but the result of structured and structuring social practices. Gender is a fragile social category which, therefore, produced varying gender identities and relations in different contexts and times (Eriksen 2001: 129; Goffman 1977: 303; Morrell 2001b: 10f.; Reskin/Padavic 1994: 6 ff.).

Despite its socially constructed nature, gender, like all socially produced distinctions, generated ‘real’ differences and inequalities among individuals throughout human history. Yet, the fragility of gender as an action-based social category enables ruptures and transgressions, such as the gender-coded (body) practices to destabilise the gender order described by Judith Butler (1991: 206f.). In general, due to the non-existent congruence of gender stereotypes and reality, there is a ‘flexibility’ that allows for exceptions to the norm without them being sanctioned as (threatening) deviations. On the other hand, the dichotomous system of gender is maintained and stabilised through sanctioning, in that individuals are induced to reconcile sex, gender and sexuality (Connell 2009: 5 f.; Gildemeister/Robert 2008: 341 f.; Giddens et. al. 2009a: 214 f.; Goffman 1969: 4 f.; cf. Mauss 1975: 199-220; Reuter 2011: 153 -157). On a wider societal level, gender became deeply embedded in institutions that produced far-reaching forms of privilege and exclusion (Connell 1995: 188 f.; Gildemeister/Robert 2008: 220; Reskin/Padavic 1994: 9 ff.; Wilz 2002: 43 f.). Consequently, gender is constantly produced both in interaction and structure (Eriksen 2001: 126 ff.; Löw 2006; Reuter 2012: 150 f.; Voß 2010: 23; Wilz 2002: 44 & 270). Accordingly, I understand gender as a social category both as an individual, action related practice, as “doing gender”, that is substantiated by patriarchal ideology, but also as a dimension that shapes social structures, spaces and institutions and is shaped by them (Lewis 2022: 30f.). These spheres are inseparable, they are equally cause and effect of existing gender relations, and I aimed to include the described dynamics and relations into my analysis of the gendered inequalities in skateboarding. In this reference, I also use gender categories and attributions on the premise that they are socially constructed and produced.

Because of the pronounced male domination of skateboarding in South Africa, I was particularly interested in the role of masculinity in the sport and subculture, and will furthermore refer to central works in the field of masculinity studies in the thesis. Pierre Bourdieu’s (2005) work on male domination, combining his gaze for the material and cultural dynamics in the reproduction of class relations with feminist theory, functioned as one important conceptual approach to understand the constitution of masculinity in South African skateboarding. Bourdieu’s conceptualised view of male domination is complemented in the thesis by the approach formulated by Raewyn Connell. Connell’s contribution is particularly relevant because of the attempt to differentiate masculinity

into four categories (dominant, complicit, submissive and oppositional), which are thought of standing in a hierarchical relationship albeit referring to a conceptual core, rather than thinking masculinity as a homogeneous category in the analysis (Connell 1987, 2005, 2009; cf. Morrell 2001b: 11fl.). In the course of the analysis, I will make particular reference to Connell's certainly best-known concept, that of hegemonic masculinity which Connell defined as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (Connell 2005: 77). Characteristic for the hegemonic masculinity is that it is not only defined by the devaluation of femininity and oppression of women, but also by the subordination of other masculinities and men. Furthermore, I refer to works addressing gender and masculinity in the South African context, with a particular emphasis on sports, youth cultures and public spaces. Works by Robert Morrell (2001a, 2001b, 2019), Hans Reihling (2020) and Malose Langa (2020) proved to be particularly valuable for the analysis of masculinities in the field. One aim of this thesis is to better understand how gender relations are expressed, through which practices gender, and forms of masculinity and femininity are produced, and which mechanisms and structures produced the dominance of heterosexual boys and men and marginalisation of girls and women in the context of South African skateboarding.

2.5 Positionality: navigating race, class and gender relations during fieldwork

I would like to conclude with a few thoughts on the positionality I occupied during my fieldwork. Of high relevance in every anthropological research endeavour, especially in a patriarchal, racialised class society like South Africa, is the social position of the researcher. Depending on one's position in a society and a particular social context, different approaches and perspectives open up, which fundamentally influences the process of collecting anthropological data (Davies 1999: 5; England 1994: 248f.; Faria/Mollett 2016: 88; cf. Bourdieu/Chartier 2015: 20). To allow readers to better situate this work, I elaborate on some relevant aspects of my social positioning during my research activity. Being read as male, 'White', 'German' and middle class (as an academic from overseas) by my environment certainly impacted my ethnographic fieldwork. I only became aware of the full extent of the privilege that comes with whiteness in the course of my research stay. Certain spaces in class privileged parts of society were often easily accessible to me due to being White. Especially when dealing with some authorities and in contacts with the police, I noticed my privileged status, especially when I was out with acquaintances of colour with whom I

discussed impressions, observations, and experiences (cf. Frankenberg 1993: 1ff.). So it was, for example, only through experiencing police controls with informants and exchanging experiences that I understood how I received preferential treatment²⁷ by many South African police officers, in contrast to informants who were identified as Black, Coloured or Indian (cf. Hrzán 2009: 125f.). On the other hand, access to some class marginalised areas seemed often more difficult, as I was rather exposed as a White person in them and qua whiteness recognisable as a member of the privileged. My stay in South Africa showed me very clearly what it means to enjoy White privileges in a neocolonial world and a former White settler colony. It made me realise how much one's social position influenced the course of ethnographic research and it became obvious to me during my research that a researcher occupying a different position in the racialised class society would have encountered different opportunities and challenges to conduct anthropological research (Davies 1999: 15f.; Schramm 2009: 470f.; cf. Williams 2020: 32).

Not less than my position in the racialised class society, my position in the gendered order of society was impacting my research endeavour. During my research I was identified as a White, able-bodied heterosexual man in his early 30s. Consequently, I was in a rather comfortable position to do research in a male dominated subculture permeated by forms of sexism and homophobia. Not 'standing out' due to my (ascribed) gender identity and being able to become part of male solidarity groups were big advantages in my research. People who would have identified as female or homosexual would very likely not have been able to experience some of these spaces and certain situations. And especially in the public space in the patriarchal society, which was characterised by a high level of gender-based violence, being read as male was an advantage. At the same time, my position had clear disadvantages, such as the impossibility of experiencing sexist and homophobic discrimination first-hand. A researcher with a different position regarding gender and sexuality could have certainly addressed respective issues differently and potentially in a more complex fashion.

Revealing positionality is a never-finished process and therefore always incomplete. The revealed positionality always remains selective (cf. Gottlieb 2006: 64f.). After all, it is not only aspects of race, class, gender and (dis)ability that define the societal position of individuals, but a potentially indefinite number of aspects like personality and biography, the life situation of researchers before, during and after fieldwork, physical and psychological health, the financial situation and the status of a researcher in the academic world that impact a research process (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1996: 99).

²⁷ Only once, it seemed to me, did I experience the opposite, when policemen in Johannesburg stopped me and tried to extort money from me, assuming that as a White foreigner I would carry a lot of cash, which was (unfortunately) not the case.

And regardless of the positionality of the researcher, research stays can go brilliantly or quite badly, researchers can behave ethically and morally reprehensibly or exemplarily, they can bow to local norms and structures or transgress them. Readers can never know what is being withheld from them when researchers attempt to disclose their positionality and methodological approach in a research field. However, I do not want to serve the illusion of a ‘neutral’ science that can work uninfluenced by the social positions of the researchers, and I believe making key aspects of my social position in South African society during my fieldwork transparent allows a better, albeit incomplete, situating of the insights I aim to provide with this thesis.

3 From surfing to street skateboarding in South Africa

The aim of this chapter is to uncover the historical development of skateboarding and to illuminate its social history in South Africa. Accordingly, this attempt to describe the historical development of a sport and youth culture²⁸ includes equally social, political, economical and technological aspects. Unlike many existing works in the field of ‘skateboarding studies’ that claim to write ‘a history of skateboarding’, but actually write an exclusive history of US-American or Western European skateboarding, thus falling into Anglo- and Eurocentrism, I consider the origins of skateboarding in these spheres, but trace it’s history with a detailed look at the South African conditions and their developments. After all, like all globalised social phenomena, the popularisation of skateboarding was not a uniform and generalisable process, but a context-specific, fragmented one: There is no single history of skateboarding, even if there is an apparently identifiable origin of the sport and western societies had been skateboarding’s primary carriers in the 20th century, but rather histories of skateboarding in different parts of the world. Yet, recognising the historical becoming of South African skateboarding in the analysis necessitates involving the historical formation of modern skateboarding in the United States, and recognising the general interrelations of South Africa, North America and Western Europe. The history of the sport’s popularisation illuminated here, could be framed in the larger context of the dissemination of modern sports through European and North American (neo)colonialism and imperialism (Abraham 2017: 101; Besnier/Brownell/Carter 2017: 44f.; Levermore 2008: 184f.), or, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni had put it, in the context of a ‘postcolonial

28 In this thesis, I refer to skateboarding both as a sport and as a subculture and youth culture. A categorisation as either one or the other seemed not productive to me, as skateboarding has been referred to as both one and the other at different times and in different contexts (cf. Beal/Wilson 2004: 32; Friedel 2015: 49; Peters 2016: 41, 266; Snyder 2017: 56ff.).

neocolonised world' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: 3). South Africa's relation to the USA, that became tighter during the Cold War, has to be recognised in the analysis as it did not only involve political, economical and military cooperation, but also cultural practices and lifestyles being exchanged with the southern tip of Africa (cf. Abraham 2017: 161; Gems 2006; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013: 3f.; Wheaton 2013: 98f.).

Socio-culturally, this process encompassed ideals, norms, and role models regarding race, class, and gender. Although their political, social, and economic orders differed, the United States and South Africa, both of which had emerged from White settler colonies, were characterised by numerous parallels, especially regarding the existence of a racialised class society. As I will show, skateboarding was introduced to South Africa as a White sport into the exclusive sphere of the White South African society. Similar to other spheres of society, the tight connection of skateboarding and whiteness was increasingly questioned and undermined, especially after the fall of the apartheid regime and a few years after corresponding developments in American skateboarding. South African skateboarding visibly opened up to the majority of the country's population in the late 1990s and early 2000s, increasingly mirroring the South African demographic regarding the race and class position of its participants. Regarding gender relations, the sport remained a male dominated sphere heavily masculine connoted. It is these social developments within the sport that I would like to trace in this chapter.

Before turning to the specific history of South African skateboarding, I would like to look at the general development of the sport and the subculture. Skateboarding can fundamentally be characterised as a riding and movement game and sport, similar to sledding, scooter riding, skiing and roller-skating. Accordingly, there were various historical sources and narratives that regarded skateboarding as having developed from these activities (Borden 2001: 13f.; Schäfer 2020: 60). Due to a lack of methodologically sound historical investigations and a characteristic mixture of scientific, journalistic, pop-cultural and commercial sources, even in the academic discourse on skateboarding's history and present, precisely tracing the genesis of skateboarding seemed hardly possible. Rather, the discourse about the history of skateboarding was permeated by a wealth of myths, based on an often elusive mix of anecdotal, oral, commercial, material and journalistic sources and works (Schäfer 2020: 59f.). It would go beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt to trace the 'true genesis' of the illuminated activity in the western world before its arrival in South Africa. Apart from an academic finger exercise, replacing the murky with a concise narrative of early skateboarding may produce a small gain in understanding of modern skateboarding anyway. In this chapter I will, in consequence, focus on the development of skateboarding in its modern

form fundamentally shaped by its popularisation in Californian surfing culture where it rose in popularity as ‘sidewalk surfing’. In South Africa, surfing inspired skateboarding seemed to be the founding moment of skateboarding as such²⁹.

South African skateboarding followed the development of its US counterpart. It underwent the characteristic phases of transformation, concisely described by Schäfer for the North American and European context: From a mainly surfing-oriented riding activity on flat surfaces³⁰, it transformed into vert skateboarding, which was performed on ramps and in pools, and finally reached the peak of its popularity with street skateboarding, taking elements of freestyle skateboarding and vert skateboarding to modern urban environments, and (symbolically and medially) enriching skateboarding with elements of (American and European) urban youth cultures. Since skateboarding was popularised in South Africa by the surfing scene and industry, a connection that remained relevant until the early 1990s and shaped skateboarding’s social, cultural, economic and political characteristics, I approach the history of skateboarding by briefly looking into the history of surfing first.

3.1 A brief social history of South African surfing

The popularisation of skateboarding in South Africa was preceded by the introduction of surfing. The late 1950s and early 1960s, the “Golden Years” of South African surfing, “saw the emergence of a surfing and beach leisured culture as well as the birth of the surf industry and organised, competitive surfing at a national level” (Thompson 2015: 32). Surfing’s popularisation partly mirrored the increasing influence of US-American culture in South Africa during the Cold War, involving lifestyles, music, recreational activities and sport, and the emergence of a White South African middle class having the resources to invest into these activities (Thompson 2015: 33). In the wider global context, the dissemination of US-American culture could be observed particularly in Western European countries and (former) White settler colonies after the Second World War, like Australia and South Africa (Magubane 1979: 200; Thomson 2008: 171). This was reflected in a

29 At least, in contrast to the North American and Western European context, I could not find any sources covering skateboarding before its popularisation in the South African surfing scene. It is likely that skateboarding only became a wider social phenomenon with the import of equipment from the USA in the 1950s and 1960s, but had not played a relevant role before its commercial introduction to South Africa.

30 In his historical research on US and European skateboarding, Schäfer points out that its modern origins were not just surfing, as is often said. Rather, skateboarding in the 1960s was also influenced by elements of skiing, ice skating, car racing, ballet, gymnastics and athletics (Schäfer 2020: 60). In the South African context, on the other hand, these influences seemed to be of little importance, as skateboarding was introduced there through the connections to the Californian surfing scene and economy after it had already underwent the aforementioned developments overseas.

growing influx of products, technologies, cultural practices and lifestyles of American origin.³¹ While historically grown ties to Great Britain and British culture remained highly influential in South Africa, and the country's most popular sports, rugby, cricket and football, had never experienced a significant loss of popularity, a popularisation of American 'action and lifestyle sports' could be observed since the 1950s. As Thompson described, Californian culture increasingly played a role on South African beaches, and "Cape Town and Durban became identified less with English colonial heritage and more allied with the Californian image of a privileged and middle class leisure culture" (Thompson 2001: 94).

Well before the written documentation of surfing by European colonialists in Hawaii in the 18th century, often treated as the earliest sources documenting the sport and wrongly locating its (sole) roots in Hawaii (Wheaton 2013: 122), it was already described in the 17th century on the Ghanaian coast. As Dawson (2021: 23f.) depicts, a vibrant surfing culture had developed along the coastline of Africa between present-day Angola and Senegal. The colonialists' contact with Hawaiian surfers was particularly influential, however, as it sparked the popularisation of surfing in the US. After Hawaii had been put under colonial rule at the end of the 19th century (Gems 2006: 12), the White colonialists suppressed the Hawaiians' surfing practices, disparaging them as 'uncivilised' (Gems 2006: 4; Holt 2012: 64f.; Laderman 2014: 10f.). Yet, when Hawaii gained popularity as a holiday destination and a tourism industry developed, surfing was rehabilitated and marketed as a seemingly local, exotic practice. In this process surfing was disconnected from its cultural and social origins in the indigenous Hawaiian³² society and (medially) white-washed (Laderman 2014: 26). Since the late 19th century, surfing was brought to various locations overseas. It achieved particular popularity in California since the early 20th century. Especially after the Second World War the surfing enthusiasm in California grew dramatically (Holt 2010: 68f.). From there, surfing travelled to other regions, particularly to North Carolina and Florida. It crossed the Pacific and the Atlantic, gaining traction in New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, France and Great Britain (Gems 2006: 12f.; Warshaw 2010: 95).

31 Laderman emphasises the close connection between US imperialism and the worldwide dissemination of modern surfing: Surfing only established itself in states where the USA were influential, whereas it remained widely unpopular in socialist states and states with warm relations to the Soviet Union during the cold war. In some cases, the popularisation of surfing was a direct outcome of the stationing of American troops, for example in Japan (Laderman 2014: 4, 42f.). Even in South Africa, among the early surfers might have been American soldiers who had been stationed in Muizenberg during the First World War (Laderman 2014: 94).

32 To this day, Hawaii has retained its importance as a mythologically significant place in surfing culture (Thompson 2001: 94).

According to Warshaw, the first surfers in South Africa could be encountered at Durban's beaches since the late 1920s, but in tiny numbers³³ (Warshaw 2010: 67, 229). It was not until the 1940s that surfing became a noteworthy phenomenon. During this time, Durban developed its reputation as 'Surf City' and remained the country's surfing-hotspot in the following decades³⁴ (Thompson 2001: 91). In the 1960s and 1970s, the sport became a highly lucrative economic environment for US entrepreneurs (Holt 2010: 96). The availability of quality products from the USA was a prerequisite for surfing to rise as a commercial mass culture.³⁵ Generally, products developed and manufactured in the USA enjoyed special appreciation among South African surfers (Thompson 2015: 38f.). Particularly influential for surfing's global popularisation were US surfing films of the 1950s and 1960s making the sport known to a large mainstream audience³⁶ (Holt 2010: 95; Laderman 2014: 3; Wheaton 2013: 124).

Afrikaner John Whitmore, a resident of the Western Cape, was responsible for building early, commercial ties between the South African and the American surfing industry. Since 1949, Whitmore, after having become interested in the sport through an advert in an American magazine³⁷, was supposedly the first athlete surfing at Muizenberg and Sea Point. He had met Californian surfer and Hobie Surfboards employee Dick Metz in South Africa in 1959 and was able to knit lucrative connections to the US surfing industry, import equipment and distribute the American magazine "Surfer" in South Africa. Furthermore, Whitmore contributed towards South Africa becoming an internationally well-known surfing destination by acting as an expert for the shooting of the legendary American surf movie "The Endless Summer" (1966), guiding the film crew to surf spots known to him (Laderman 2014: 94f.; Warshaw 2010: 229). Therefore, surfing films made South African beaches visible to the western world and helped them enter the cosmos of global surfing destinations³⁸ (Thompson 2015: 180). For class privileged surfers from western

33 According to Warshaw, during the 1930s only about 3000 surfers were surfing in Australia, Hawaii and California (Warshaw 2010: 67).

34 Glen Thompson had estimated the number of surfers in Durban by examining historical sources: around 1950 between 10 and 50, 1964 about 350, 1968 about 5000 and in the 1970s several thousand (Thompson 2008: 85). According to these numbers, a massive boost of surfing's popularity was to be witnessed in the second half of the 1960s, flanked by the emergence of surfing films and the first surfing magazines.

35 According to Thompson, the Americanisation of South African surfing encompassed a material, technological aspect. New materials and technologies for the manufacture of surfboards were imported from the USA. Polyurethane foam must be emphasised in this respect, as it revolutionised surfing through lighter and more durable surfboards replacing wooden types (Thompson 2015: 38).

36 In the first issue of South African Surfer in 1965, surf films were attributed a key role in popularising the new phenomenon: "There is no doubt that South Africa has found a new sport which has really made the coastal towns start buzzing. Nothing has made people from all walks of life take to surfing more than the full length surf films which were shown to the general public for the first time in 1963." (South African Surfer 1965 1/1).

37 ZigZag (n.d.): "The First True Surfer" [blog post], ZigZag, online-source. <https://www.zigzag.co.za/features/throwback-thursday/the-first-true-surfer/> [accessed: 05.09.2019].

38 "The Endless Summer" (1966) was of particular importance in this regard. According to Thompson it was theatrically released in 1966 in South Africa, was played to packed audiences in Cape Town and "inspired many

countries visiting surf-spots in other parts of the world became increasingly feasible with sinking costs for international flights. A growing number of western surfers set off for so-called ‘surfaris’ and explored beaches in other parts of the world, often in (former) European colonies (Laderman 2014: 4, 44): “surf tourism was born” (Holt 2010: 95). Transnational relationships among surfers intensified and “South African surfing got the impression that it had become included within the surfing nations of the West” (Thompson 2015: 37). In the 1960s the number of South African surfers increased significantly, a lucrative surf industry developed locally, films and magazines appeared and the evolution of competitive surfing could be witnessed (Laderman 2014: 6; Thompson 2015: 32).

During the 1960s, surfing was largely associated with White American ‘alternative’ counterculture, the hippie movement in particular (Holt 2010: 96; Thompson 2015: 46). Surf media played an important role in this regard by emphasising connections between surfing and rebellious youth cultures (Booth 2008: 94; Laderman 2014: 3). Here, the origins of the stereotype of “the surfer as a social dropout and deviant” (Thompson 2015: 47) can be found that persisted until the late 1970s, to be then slowly replaced in a process of sportification by a “clean-cut male surfer image as a marketable aquatic athlete” over the following decades (ibid.). In fact, the surfing world was never a homogenous space, but commonly a distinction was drawn between sport-oriented surfing and soul surfing, the latter attaching surfing to a hippie-lifestyle. For some young men flirting with counter-culture and left-wing political positions, surfing provided a space away from the conservative, racist and reactionary strata of the South African society. For example, Paul Weinberg, growing up in Pietermaritzburg of the 1950s and 1960s, explained to me in an interview that surfing opened up a spiritual connection with the water and the elements. Unlike the sport-oriented surfers, and reactionary surfers of an older generation, the soul surfers critically reflected the apartheid order and opposed it, like Weinberg with his photojournalistic works and by dodging conscription through expatriation. Yet, surfing was unavoidably embedded in the wider social structures and primarily accessible to the White middle class throughout the 20th century (Laderman 2014: 26).

In the history of American and South African surfing, people of colour were excluded through direct and structural discrimination, above all through exclusion from surf spots, resources, media and fundamental rights (Laderman 2014: 39). The racial segregation of beaches kept surfers of colour from accessing water sports in both countries, turning surfing into an activity that was more or less exclusively available to the White population in the United States and in South Africa (Thompson

young men and women to take up surfing” (Thompson 2015: 41). Endless Summer joined the temporary popularity of Hollywood surf films in the 1950s and 1960s, all of which conveyed a romanticised glorification of surfing and beach culture (Booth 2008: 93).

2015: 143; cf. Merrett 2007: 7; Wheaton 2013: 147). This partly explains the rather faint-hearted, uncritical views of the international surfing world on the apartheid regime. Although surfing was never ideologically mobilised by the apartheid government like mainstream sports (cf. Farred 2003: 124), it was still entangled in the apartheid order (Thompson 2008: 91). The “golden years of surfing” (Thompson 2015: 31) in South Africa coincided with the era of high apartheid between the late 1950s and early 1970s (Mabin 1992: 18f.; cf. Wheaton 2013: 113). Whiteness and the exclusion of people of colour were inscribed into the structures of the sport (Thompson 2015: 105). Only after the so-called ‘beach wars’ in 1989, almost 20 years after the desegregation of beaches in the US, South African beaches were officially desegregated. Until then, the non-White majority was kept from accessing beaches and surf spots (Morrell 2001: 24; Thompson 2015: 150f.; Wheaton 2013: 113). In addition, surfing was institutionalised in clubs and membership was a prerequisite for participation in competitions. Founded in 1965, the South African Surfriders’ Association, the most important state-recognised organisational body of national surfing, submitted to legislation of the apartheid state, which categorically prohibited South Africans of colour from becoming members (Thompson 2008: 96). Racism in surfing during apartheid was at times also manifest in direct forms of discrimination: Surfers of colour were attacked and chased off beaches, and some White surfers did not shy away from pointing out violations of beach segregation to state security forces (Booth 2008: 108f.; cf. Thompson 2015: 150f.). Therefore, surfing was not solely a ‘countercultural’ and rebellious space, it was also embedded in the racialised, classified and gendered structures of the South African society (cf. Besnier/Brownell 2012: 450; Bourdieu 1999: 432). This was mirrored in the media landscape that surrounded the sport. South African surfers featured in surfing’s media publications would be predominantly young, White, heterosexual and from privileged class backgrounds (Wheaton 2013: 132). In the words of surfing historian Glen Thompson

“[...] surfing accentuated a white-washed masculinity of social and sporting privilege in Durban and elsewhere along South Africa’s coastline. As such, this masculinity was complicit in the dominant white masculinities of South Africa in the era of decolonisation and the early Cold War years. These white masculinities stressed racial superiority over blacks and a shared national identity, irrespective of whether they were birthed into the political and economic privileges of Afrikaans or English-speaking white society, forged through the shared experiences of the World War, military conscription (as of 1960), job reservation, the chauvinist public and domestic power over women, and a fixation with sport (especially rugby).” (Thompson 2008: 91).

On the other hand, masculinities in surfing were no one-dimensional issue. To speak of hegemonic masculinity, as Thompson does, hints towards the existence of masculinities that deviate from it (cf. Connell 2005: 77ff.). Surfing certainly formed a cosmos for liberal White men who rejected the apartheid order and for whom surfing, conscious of its racialised exclusivity, offered a sporting and spiritual retreat. For these men, the connection to US hippie culture was more than a symbolic confession, but actually formed part of lifestyles oppositional to the gendered and racialised demands posed by the apartheid-regime. For surfers maintaining liberal political positions, the sport could provide an escape from the grim realities of the apartheid society. However, in the commercial and professional sector, and thus also in the hegemonic discourse around the sport, such views were rather marginalised. And most importantly, because of its structural embeddedness, surfing did not represent a space in which the prevailing order could be effectively disrupted.

Surfers of colour were, without question, highly numerically marginalised through structural and direct effects of the apartheid order. They were furthermore largely ignored in White-led media publications, which discursively reinforced their actual marginalisation and surfing appeared as even more White dominated than it actually was (Thompson 2001: 101; Thompson 2008: 83; Wheaton 2013: 113f.). The first South African surfing magazine, *South African Surfer*, even disseminated racist stereotypes about Black South Africans in the mid-1960s, exemplifying the reproduction of racism and the rejection of a critical discussion of apartheid in the professional surfing world (Laderman 2014: 103ff.; Thompson 2015: 162). During my archival research this was reflected in surfing magazines comprehensively leaving apartheid and its consequences out of the picture when covering the sport (cf. Thompson 2015: 113).

In contrast to mainstream sports, South African surfing was not seriously affected by the international sports boycott against South Africa until the mid-late 1980s. Since 1960, international pressure against the South African regime was increasing, which affected the professional sports world. In 1964, the country was excluded from the Summer Olympics and formally expelled from the International Olympic Committee in 1970. South Africa disappeared from the map of international sports events (Warshaw 2010: 335). Even though not all sports were equally affected by the international boycott, it significantly affected the most popular ones, like rugby, cricket and football. Yet, the boycott had no significant effect on surfing which developed international competition formats since 1964 under the wing of the International Surfing Federation (Laderman 2014: 105). South African professional surfers kept participating in international contests, and surfing events in apartheid South Africa remained a legitimate stop of the international competitive world (Warshaw 2010: 335). It was not until the pillars of the apartheid regime began to disintegrate

in the 1980s that members of the professional surfing elite did increasingly take a stand against apartheid. In 1985, Australian Tom Carroll became the first professional surfer to call for a boycott of South African surfing contests³⁹ and motivated more top athletes to join in (Laderman 2014: 116; Thompson 2015: 118ff.; Warshaw 2010: 397f.). South African surfers of colour did not remain inactive and founded the explicitly anti-racist South African Surfing Union in 1988 (Thompson 2015: 149). It took until 2001, though, that the national umbrella organisation Surfing South Africa represented all South African surfers (Thompson 2008: 83). Although internationally successful Black surfers like Sharon Nongo symbolised a growing diversity of class, race and gender positions among athletes, the sport continued to be largely an affair of class privileged, White men (Thompson 2015: 173, 185f.).

For women the world of surfing was generally hard to access. Female surfers were highly marginalised in surfing and only “made up a small percentage of the total local surfing population” (Thompson 2015: 71). As Thompson argues surfing media was permeated by machismo and objectifying, sexualised depictions of female surfers for a long time. A verdict I can confirm after having gone through a larger number of surfing magazines in the National Libraries of South Africa in Cape Town and Pretoria. In surfing magazines women were most often depicted as passive bystanders, but seldom as active athletes (cf. Bourdieu 2005: 134). At times, women were accused of generally lacking surfing skills compared to men by male journalists of established surf publications (Thompson 2015: 73f.). For women of colour, discrimination and marginalisation in surfing had particularly far-reaching implications, as they were not only marginalised as women in a patriarchal society, but also through their class and race position. Black women, the structurally most oppressed group in South Africa, were hardly able to engage in surfing at all. Even during my field research between 2016 and 2020, women of colour were extremely small in number in surfing. This exemplified the persistence of oppression mirrored in the unequal access to leisure pursuits among the population. The number of women surfing and their visibility in the media did only slowly increase since the 1980s and 1990s (ibid. 95f.), and since the late 1990s the surf industry intensified its ambitions to market products to women (ibid. 99ff.). For a long time, South African surfing remained a playing field for White men, it diversified its demographics very slowly even after the end of apartheid.

Surfing thus formed a socio-cultural field, in which forms of domination and power that recurred to race, gender and class in the wider society, as well as their transformations and continuities in the course of time, could be witnessed. Although surfing partially resonated with ‘open minded’

³⁹ In addition, Carroll had also cut ties with the South African company Instinct, owned by South African surfing legend Sean Thompson, as he saw the exploitation of Black workers there (Laderman 2014: 116).

countercultures, it was not until the 1980s that the sport began to open up and a rising number of athletes started to publicly oppose the impact of apartheid on the sport. Due to its close connection, the formation of skateboarding and skateboarding's social characteristics were strongly influenced by its close relationship with surfing in its early formation. Unlike surfing, however, skateboarding developed a more diverse demographic in terms of race and class of athletes from the late 1980s and early 1990s onwards. I will outline this development in the following section.

3.2 Skateboarding in South Africa under apartheid

South African skateboarding generally followed the 'developmental phases' of American skateboarding. It emerged from surfing-inspired sidewalk surfing in the 1960s, transformed into vert skateboarding especially from the mid-late 1970s, and finally approached urban architecture more comprehensively with the emergence of street skateboarding from the mid-1980s. Coming and going in waves of popularity, the sport and subculture developed a long-lasting popularity since the late 1990s.

Initially, skateboarding was carried to South Africa through Californian surfing (Masterson 2008b: 18), similar to the dissemination of skateboarding in coastal areas in other parts of the world where surfing had gained popularity (cf. Borden 2001: 32). During the late 1940s and early 1950s, skateboarding had become a popular leisure activity on the West Coast of the United States when surfers started to use skateboards for 'sidewalk surfing', the imitation of wave riding on asphalt. The first commercial skateboards appeared in the 1950s and circulated countrywide from California, entering the market on the East Coast of the United States in the 1960s. Until their commercial distribution, skateboard-like devices and toys existed in the form of self-made vehicles, at times made from scooters that had been stripped of their handlebars (Borden 2001: 13ff.; Warshaw 2010: 217). Through its popularisation in the surfing world, the skateboard was increasingly viewed as a 'sports device', alongside its connotation with child's play. The activity achieved its first nation-wide peak of popularity as 'sidewalk surfing' in the USA in the early-mid-1960s (Schäfer 2020: 59; Warshaw 2010: 217). Skateboarding's popularity dwindled again rapidly in 1965, though, but it established itself as a permanent cultural practice in Californian beach culture. As Schäfer meticulously carves out, early skateboarding was not only inspired by surfing, but at least partially influenced by gymnastics, skiing, figure skating and roller skating during this era (Schäfer 2018: 47f.).

Carried by American surfers, skateboarding was introduced to South Africa in the late 1950s and early 1960s⁴⁰, initially becoming popular in Cape Town and Durban (Masterson 2008a: 81). As previously mentioned, it was the supposed father of South African surfing, John Whitmore, who imported what are believed to be the first skateboards to South Africa and was among the first practitioners. In an article in the Cape Argus from 1964 skateboarding was presented under the headline ‘New craze for surfers - on wheels’ and Whitmore could be seen on a photograph skateboarding.⁴¹ The tight connection of skateboarding and surfing was evident in surfing magazines published between the 1960s and early 1990s. Readers of South African Surfer were introduced to skateboarding since 1965 (South African Surfer 1965 1/1) and were informed about surf shops selling skateboards in the following year (South African Surfer 1966 2/1: 36). This exemplified the crucial role of the South African surfing industry in distributing early commercial skateboards, although skateboards could also soon be found in the shelves of some sports shops. Until the mid 1970s, the growing popularity turned the sale of skate equipment into a lucrative business (ZigZag 1/1 1976: 15):

“Thanks to demand, skateboarding’s [sic] spread quickly to surf and sport shops along the coast [from Durban] down to Cape Town, 1000 miles to the west.” (Masterson 2008a: 81)

The close relationship of surfing and skateboarding in the 1960s and 1970s was confirmed by the owner of one of the early importers of skateboards to South Africa, Peter Wright, who had opened a surf and skateboard shop in Muizenberg in 1971. Still in the latter half of the 1970s, buyers of Capetonian Wright Skateboards were often surfers who turned to skateboarding as an alternative to surfing:

Wright: It was always the surfers that did it [skateboarding] first, because they, when they weren’t surfing because the surf wasn’t good, the next thing to do was to ride a skateboard.

Interviewer: So this, so these were like your main clients, like the most guys who bought skateboards so to say were surfers who did it like besides their surfing?

40 Characteristically, developments and trends in US-American skateboarding reached South Africa with a delay over sometimes several years.

41 The John Whitmore Book Project (n.d.): A site dedicated to the publication of the biography of John Thornton Whitmore [website], Wordpress, online-source: <https://johnwhitmorebook.wordpress.com/resources/#jp-carousel-237> [accessed: 11.12.2021].

Wright: Yes, yes, yes.

Several surfers and skateboarders that I met who had been involved in these sports in the 1960s and 1970s explained to me how skateboarding was very much surf-inspired and strived for the emulation of wave riding on asphalt. The reference to surfing was clearly reflected by the fact that boards were often ridden barefooted and without protective gear (cf. Borden 2001: 31). Former professional freestyle skateboarder Errol Strachan emphasised how the imitation of surfing movements combined with freestyle elements on skateboards was still common in the mid-1970s:

Strachan: I skated in the 1970s, I started skating about 1975. And that was just like you would ride and slide and surf, and you know, some barrell jumping and wheelies and handstands, headstands, we used to do that then already.

Strachan and his friend Arnold ‘Arnie’ Lambert, both had grown up skateboarding in the Cape Flats of Cape Town and had both started to skate in the 1970s, explained to me that skateboarding gained more or less popularity in different areas of the city due to their exposition to beach culture. According to them, it gained higher popularity in neighbourhoods closer to the beaches, like Grassy Park. In districts further inland, like Elsie’s River, skateboarding seemed to have enjoyed less popularity, because beach culture was less present and accessible in such neighbourhoods, during the apartheid days in particular.⁴² The first phase of South African skateboarding was accordingly, mirroring developments in California, characterised by a close entanglement of skateboarding and surfing, and beach culture in the wider sense, with skateboarding being practised as an imitation of surfing on solid ground. The phase of sidewalk surfing and its variants, such as slalom, downhill and freestyle, was then succeeded by the popularisation of vert skateboarding since the mid-1970s.

3.2.1 The advent and popularisation of vert skateboarding

After skateboarding had become known to the wider public as a surfing related activity limited to riding on flat or slightly inclined surfaces, the popularisation of vert skateboarding followed in the late 1970s in the United States of America. Emphasising the vertical dimension and introducing the first aerial manoeuvres to the trick canon by making use of the steep walls of (empty) swimming pools, large metal and concrete pipes, steep banks of concrete channels, and, later, wooden and

⁴² Certainly, the divergent class composition of the residents had also determined their opportunities to turn to skateboarding. In addition to access to the equipment, the existing infrastructure was another relevant factor: in townships equipped only with dirt roads, skateboarding was hardly or not at all possible.

metal ramps specifically designed for skateboarding, vert skateboarding remained the most popular and commercially exploited form of skateboarding until the late 1980s in western countries (Borden 2001: 34; Schäfer 2020: 63f., 143). The Z-Boys have internationally received high recognition for their trailblazing role in developing the once innovative, radical, aggressive and reckless approach towards skating emptied swimming pools in Los Angeles (Borden 2001: 37f.; Schäfer 2020: 65). The spectacular riding style was made possible by new technological developments. Wheels made from polyurethane were significantly superior in grip, durability and rolling characteristics to those previously made of metal or clay⁴³, and new board shapes allowed much better control of the skateboard (cf. Borden 2001: 20; Masterson 2008a: 80). These technological innovations allowed skateboarders to approach the urban architecture more aggressively. The surge in popularity led to a significant growth of the skateboarding industry, which found lucrative business fields in the sale of equipment, the use of skateboarding for advertising purposes and the operation of commercial skateparks (Borden 2001: 19f.).

South African skateboarding followed these American trends relatively quickly, joining vert skateboarding's popularisation in California⁴⁴ with a slight delay. This was well reflected in media that portrayed skateboarding in the late 1970s. In the monthly surfing magazine *ZigZag*, skateboarding was prominently represented between 1976, the founding year of the publication, and late 1978, when this phase of skateboarding seemed to come to an end (cf. Schäfer 2018: 49). In *ZigZag*'s first issue from 1976, downhill, freestyle and slalom skateboarding were featured, exemplifying that these styles still defined what was regarded as skateboarding at the time (*ZigZag* 1/1 1976: 15). Vert skateboarding was not yet popular, and modern street skateboarding still unknown (cf. Borden 2001: 31f.).

Early on, skateboarding was framed in such publications as a physically tough and demanding activity that requires athletes to carry 'masculine' qualities, especially the willingness to take risks and accept injuries. An advertisement from Alpha Skateboards emphasised the supposedly risky nature for skateboarding in a hyperbolic way: "When you are drawing lines at + - 90 K.P.H. there's no room for error" (*ZigZag* 1976 1/1: 14). In the following years, however, the focus on such ground-based riding styles was increasingly displaced by reports about vert skateboarding, which in comparison appeared to be truly riskier and allowed the caption of much more spectacular

43 Accordingly, in the first issue of *ZigZag* advertisements of skateboard vendors emphasising steering stability, shock absorption, improved handling and longevity of polyurethane wheels can be found (*ZigZag* 1/1 1976: 14). In an interview, Peter Wright, owner of the Corner Shop in Muizenberg, emphasised the novelty of polyurethane wheels from the United States compared to the common steel wheels of the 1960s and explained his efforts to import the famous Cadillac Wheels from California, the first commercial polyurethane skateboard-wheels available.

44 Borden identifies 1972/73 as the beginning of the second phase of popularity of skateboarding in the United States (Borden 2001: 19ff.).

footage⁴⁵. In an article from 1979, ZigZag-author Johnny Murrell was encouraging South African skateboarders to join the Californian trend of skating waterless swimming pools:

“For close on 20 years the skateboarders in the very city that spawned the sport in our fair land have had to suffer the indignities of pavements, car-parks, public roads, plus the odd hastily erected ramp here and there, with very little relief in sight. So what do we do? We pull out the plug, that’s what. Of the nearest swimming pool. Unbeknown to the designers of the modern day gunite hemeounes splashing pond, the deep end bowl can offer some healthy challenges to even the hottest vippers around. Bruce Celliers and George discovered this recently when we drained a local pool. [...] ultra-radical off the lip manoeuvres can be executed” (ZigZag 3/1 1979: 31).

Even though the relationship between surfing and skateboarding was never completely vanishing, it was with the advent of vert that skateboarding moved away from its tight connection to the surfing world. Skateboarding’s separation was visibly evident by the demise of surfing-inspired fashion. In the late 1970s, skateboard-specific functional clothing, especially helmets, shoes, bulky knee and elbow protectors as well as gloves, became more important as high speeds were reached in skateparks and on ramps, and the likelihood of falls grew due to more complex and daring manoeuvres, compared to freestyle, asphalt surfing and slalom. Exemplarily, in a 1977 issue of ZigZag, the author depicted as a novelty that to access a commercial bowl park in California “compulsory gear is closed in shoes, gloves, helmet, elbow pads and knee pads” (ZigZag 1/2 1977: 19).

45 In fact, it could be argued that skateboarding on flat ground tends to generally look very unspectacular in still images, while vert skateboarding can appear more spectacular in photographs, as snapshots of daring manoeuvres (such as jumps and lip tricks) are frozen in permanence and can be made to appear more spectacular than they actually are by photographic techniques.



Gary Stevens sout arching, Lahee Park



photos Ted Du Plooy

Cruising, the park



ZIGZAG 17

Illustration 2: The transition from sidewalk surfing to vert skateboarding was visible in magazines of the time. The photograph on the left depicts two South African sidewalk surfers (ZigZag 1/1 1976: 15). About one year later, the US professional Chad Chaput showcased the new trend of vert skateboarding in public events on a tour in South Africa (ZigZag 2/3 1978: 32).

It was surf shops, like Wright's Corner Shop in Muizenberg, that played an important role in promoting the new skateboarding style by providing equipment and infrastructure, and setting up events making the sport known in the public sphere. According to Masterson, the Corner Shop could be seen as the epicentre of skateboarding in Cape Town in the 1970s (Masterson 2008a: 81). Wright invested into skateboarding by organising events, demos and competitions, sponsoring a small skateboard team, and providing skateboarding facilities. Also in Durban, featuring a lively surfing scene, a number of business enterprises emerged around the sport. The first South African professional skateboarder, Gary Stevens, was a Durbanite. Stevens was sponsored by skateboard entrepreneur Snowy Smith, who produced equipment with his company Alpha Skateboards and operated a skate shop in the city. Stevens stated in an interview that he earned a considerable income from skateboarding in the late 1970s. He toured the country giving demonstrations at shopping centres, had appearances in TV commercials and a signature skateboard carrying Steven's name was sold on the South African market (ZigZag 14/1 1990: 44). Furthermore, Stevens promoted skateboarding's public visibility by organising the first major skateboarding events, the so-called 'SA Skateboarding Champs', in 1976 in Pietermaritzburg and 1977 in Durban (Masterson 2008a: 81). Another key figure from Durban was surf shop-owner Mike Larmont who had started to import skateboarding equipment from the US in 1974, selling it in his shop and sending it to other sport and surf shops in the country. Imports from the US-market were particularly sought by South African skateboarders, because skateboarding equipment of similar quality and variety was not produced locally. Getting one's hand on American quality products remained a problem for skateboarders throughout apartheid, as was still stated in a ZigZag article from 1988, and turned skateboarding into a rather costly activity:

“South African skaters have a serious problem – there's no decent skateboards or protective gear available in the country. A few of us have imported boards from the States, which takes a long time and works out pretty expensive, but it is really worth it.”
(ZigZag 12/1 1988: 34)

US equipment was sought after for its quality and technical innovations, for which the USA continued to play a leading role in the following decades. South African surfers and skaters, like those in other parts of the world, followed developments in California very closely. Surf shop owner Peter Wright emphasised how South African businesses were often copying trends witnessed in the surfing and skateboarding scene overseas:

Wright: I called the skateboards Wright skateboards. I later changed that to Southwest, marketed under the Southwest [brand]. But at first I called them Wright, because I made Wright surfboards, so I made Wright skateboards.

Interviewer: Ok.

Wright: Copying the yanks, like Hobie Surfboards, Hobie Skateboards, you know. And then later I changed it to Southwind, and we make Southwind surfboards today [in 2017]. And we, we, we occasionally we put something together as a Southwind skateboard. 'Cause we made them for quite a while. The trouble is the yanks lead the push, you know, and in the end all we do is we end up copying them.

Relevant in this regard were the international relations between South Africa and the USA. Ties to the US were essential in creating and maintaining a skateboarding culture in South Africa. Economic, political and social relationships between the two countries remained vivid despite international sanctions and rhetorical condemnation of apartheid by the US government due to South Africa's geopolitical and economic importance (Horne 2019a: 306f.; Horne 2019b: 9ff.; Legassick/Hemson 1976: 7f.; Magubane 1979: 214; Minter 1986: 221ff.; Thomson 2008: 170ff.). But similar to other branches of the economy, the importation of desired goods and raw materials could require dubious channels in order to circumvent restrictions imposed on international trade. Businessmen like Wright found ways circumventing international sanctions to import the sought-after equipment:

Wright: A lot of times when we started getting some of these [American] boards they were very difficult for us to make here. We weren't able to get maple, because Apartheid and South Africa, you know, everything would come to South Africa, got shipped through some other place, you know, or shipped some dodgy method.

Interviewer: I see.

Wright: You know, because most of the outside world were opposing South Africa.

Interviewer: Ya.

Wright: But a part of the outside world continued to sell to us, you know.

The import of quality equipment from the USA was thus rather difficult, but could be realised through more or less legal channels. For South African skateboarding at the time, this was essential in order to follow the developments pioneered by US skateboarding (Masterson 2008a: 80).

However, the aggravated circumstances certainly led to skateboarding becoming more expensive compared to the USA and Europe. Only with the end of apartheid and the accompanying elimination of sanctions did the availability and selection of equipment increase significantly, and began the costs for equipment to drop (Masterson 2008a: 86). Apart from selling products to South African businesses, US companies were also directly involved in the South African market. Pepsi, for example, attempted to enter the skateboarding market in the second half of the 1970s in America. In 1978, the company had employed its own team of professional skateboarders performing demos in the USA, sold Pepsi-branded skateboard equipment and protective gear, and had produced TV-commercials featuring Pepsi drinking skateboarders.⁴⁶ The company later aimed for the South African market by allowing Alpha Skateboards from Durban to produce and sell Pepsi-branded equipment (ZigZag 1/4 1977: 23). To stimulate the sale of skate products, Pepsi-sponsored skate-competitions and sent 17-years old professional American skateboarder Chris Chaput on a tour to South Africa in 1978, travelling with a personal manager and a photographer, and being joined by South African skateboarder Gary Smith⁴⁷ (ZigZag 2/3 1978: 32). However, the Pepsi-equipment sold by Alpha Skateboards was of poor quality, Pepsi left the market again and other, well-known US-companies were to establish themselves as suppliers of quality equipment in the long term (Masterson 2008a: 83). With regard to the activities of US companies in the South African skateboarding sector in South Africa, it could thus be observed that the 'lax' imposition and enforcement of sanctions against South Africa by the USA left enough leeway to ensure that economic networks were not necessarily threatened (cf. Minter 1986: 216). This was an important prerequisite for a skateboarding culture to develop in South Africa. The influential role of American companies was still an obvious feature of South African skateboarding when I conducted fieldwork. South African skateboarders largely relied on imported equipment and resources, in most cases produced in the USA, Mexico and China. Only a few selected companies produced equipment locally.

46 See for example: Surfstyle4 (31.03.2010): Skateboarding Pepsi Tv Commercial 1978 [video], Youtube, online-source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CnUnejld64> [accessed: 12.08.2019].

47 The fact that racism and misogyny played an often underlying but in some instances obvious role in the White skateboarding of apartheid South Africa becomes clear in this excerpt from the ZigZag article on Chris Chaput's visit: "From his first 360 at Solid Surf he has had a fan following which is snowballing rapidly. The groupies who range in age from 10-40 almost faint away if he looks their way. Chris reckons local lasses are 'surprisingly good looking' and so far he hasn't seen one 'chick with a bone through her nose.'" (ZigZag 3/2 1978: 32)

3.2.2 The fall and rise of vert skateboarding in the 1980s

Until about 1982 the second phase of skateboarding's popularity came to an end. This meant, above all, that the important commercial players pulled out. There were hardly any events and media coverage of skateboarding, facilities were closed and the general popularity of the sport dwindled. Only a small number of dedicated skateboarders remained loyal to the sport:

“[J]ust as skateboarding was starting to pick up again in the US, the talented riders and the genuine promoters for South African skateboarding had burned out or been bankrupted. All the parks had closed [...] and South African skateboarding went into a deep slumber, in fact a coma, where it stayed for a few years, until the next wave broke on our shores.” (Masterson 2008a: 83)

Under these unstable conditions, a nationally networked scene had not yet formed. Even in phases of popularity there were only few contacts between skateboarders in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban, few events drawing participants from throughout the country and few media publications enabling skaters to identify themselves as members of an imagined, international community. A nationwide 'scene' would only take shape from the latter half of the 1980s and particularly in the 1990s. Due to the high relevance of commercial players in the institutionalisation of the sport, skateboarding had not been able to develop any institutional stability independent of commercial success. Until the writing of this book, no recognised umbrella organisations, independent of commercial players and acting on behalf of skateboarders, had been formed in South Africa. Instead, commercial actors carried what could be regarded as rather fluid forms of the sport's institutionalisation regarding national and international events and competitions, building and maintaining facilities, organising forms of youth development, and representation of skateboarder's perspectives in the public sphere through media outlets and spokespersons. Consequently, the coming and going of commercial players, unavoidable in a shaky market environment, caused a coming and going of event and competition formats, facilities, products, and skateboarding media. Due to its largely commercialised institutionalisation, skateboarding was to develop a rather fragile institutionalised structure which was, at least partly, causal for its recurrent coming and going of its popularity. Due to this circumstance, a discourse emerged in the world of skateboarding, in which the developments of the market were closely followed and ways of a beneficial marketing were discussed. For example, already in the first article on skateboarding in the surfing magazine *ZigZag*, one could read a defence of the sport against accusations of being only a short-term craze. Skateboarding had supposedly already undergone a downfall after its first wave of popularity in the

1960s and had “smashed open it’s coffin lid over a year ago” in 1976 (ZigZag 1/1 1976: 15). Author Wayne Shaw argued that recent sales figures would indicate rising popularity of skateboarding in South Africa, “more and more imports are pouring in to meet the ever persistent demand” (ZigZag 1/1 1976: 15), particularly in coastal areas, but there would be a general lack of available equipment and skateable infrastructure for the “ever increasing skateboarding population” (ZigZag 1/1 1976: 15). According to this article, attempts to create national skateboarding organisations had failed, and skateboarding had become legally banned from public spaces, painting a conflictive relationship between skateboarding and the general public. The author, however, seemed certain about a glorious future for the sport. In 1978, ZigZag proclaimed that there were “[a]lready twice as many skateboarders as there are surfers, and with better politics this number is bound to increase” (ZigZag 2/2 1978: 31). According to the magazine, there were not enough skateparks to cater the rising number of skaters. Despite such confident statements and predictions, skateboarding would experience recurring periods of popularisation and decline until the late 1990s.

In terms of practice, equipment and fashion skateboarding increasingly moved away from surfing. A skateboarding scene with close links to surfing persisted and surfing magazines remained the most important medium for South African skaters until the 1990s, but with the development of vert and street skateboarding the sport was carried away from the beach to commercial skateparks and backyard ramps. In the 1970s, skateparks made their way from North America to South Africa as an architectural novelty (Borden 2001: 72). The first skateparks did not feature the obstacles and ramps typical for skateparks since the 1990s, but rather provided landscapes of concrete waves, which made an experience similar to surfing possible. They were, furthermore, increasingly providing simulated swimming pools (‘bowls’), that skaters began to ride since the later 1970s with vert skateboarding (Borden 2001: 63f.; Masterson 2008a: 82). In an article titled “Blood on the track” Peter Townend described his observations during a visit to the La Costa skatepark in California, 20 miles north of San Diego, which consisted of a landscape of artificial ditches and banks. As the title of the article implies, spectacularity and physical risks were emphasised in the depiction of this new skateboarding style. Although, according to the author, protective gear was compulsory for skateboarders visiting the skatepark, “[t]hey still have at least one guy a day with a broken limb” (ZigZag 2/1 1978: 19). One year later, Townend enthusiastically depicted evolving trends in skatepark design and vertical skateboarding vividly, underlining the pioneering role American skateboarding and skatepark design had from the perspective of South African skateboarders:

“These parks are the ultimate, like continuous concrete waves with non-stop banks and usually ending with the most outrageous bowl [...] The kids everywhere are hot and the sky is the limit, and most are into riding swimming-pools, and a new discovery – giant cylindrical pipes in which they are going past the vertical which is hard to believe – but these guys have no fear.” (ZigZag 2/2 1978: 33)

As ZigZag issues from 1978 and 1979 document, vert skateboarding on ramps and in pools gained much relevance soon after (ZigZag 2/3 1978: 32f.). Whereas early skateboarding was tightly connected to surfing and beach culture, and enjoyed popularity especially in coastal cities like Durban and Cape Town⁴⁸ (Masterson 2008a: 81), the new style helped to emancipate skateboarding from the coast of the country and carry it further inland (ZigZag 1/3 1977: 15). Nothing expressed this more strongly than Johannesburg, an industrial giant with no access to the sea, becoming the South African centre of vert skateboarding since the late 1970s (blunt 7/3 2003: 39). Errol Strachan and Arnie Lambert emphasised in an interview how skateboarding in Johannesburg had built the reputation to house the best vert skateboarders of the country during that time:

Interviewer: Was skateboarding in Joburg different than skating in Cape Town?

Strachan: There were lots of ramps and pools in Joburg, we didn't have much of that here [in Cape Town], you know. That access to that.

Lambert: Because that's the place where there is no waves, no waves, there is no sea.

Interviewer: You need concrete waves.

Lambert: Ya, if you got raw waves on this beach you can go to that beach.

Strachan: There were great skateboarders in Joburg, good damn skaters. Our skaters were never on par in those years with anything in the states. We were pretty shit. You know, but that's because we weren't exposed to skating with other skaters at that level, or getting to understand how to, you know, use the terrain or whatever. Like when the guys were starting to do ollies out the pool, our guys were still grabbing early, you know.

During my research, Germiston Bowl bore material witness to the legacy of the vert era in Johannesburg. Germiston Bowl was an unusual hybrid of a snake run and a massive bowl that architecturally combined sidewalk surfing and vert skateboarding, and was well known and popular

⁴⁸ Wayne Shaw states in the first ZigZag issue that “[s]ales figures clearly indicate that the sport has enjoyed much popularity in coastal centres” (ZigZag 1/1 1976: 15).

in the nationwide skateboarding scene still 30 years after its construction (Session 1/2 2002). Over the following years into the later 1980s more skateparks and vert ramps popped up in bigger cities, particularly in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban. Wealthier skateboarders built private ramps in their backyards. Because of the specific architecture required for vert, it was mostly accessible by the middle class and therefore White South Africans. As skateparks and ramps were increasingly built in and around malls targeting White middle class consumers from the 1980s onwards, this tendency was structurally reinforced (cf. De Vries 2008: 303).

Vert formed the ‘supreme discipline’ of skateboarding until the mid-1980s and remained popular until the early 1990s, but then slowly lost popularity with the advent of street skateboarding. Several factors might have accelerated vert’s demise in South Africa. Influenced by the popularisation and marketing of street in American skateboarding, vert was increasingly regarded as an ‘uncool’ and outdated branch of skating (cf. Mullen 2004: 229). A number of popular South African vert skateboarders were furthermore forced into conscription and vanished from the scene (blunt 7/3 2003: 40). Numerous facilities had fallen into disrepair, were no longer usable, or had been demolished. The resulting lack of facilities contributed significantly to the ‘dying’ of Vert, as contemporary witness and former pro-skater Adrian Day emphasised in an interview:

“Interviewer: Why do you think there are so few vert skaters in SA. Is it still seen as uncool or is it just the lack of facilities?”

Day: Purely a lack of facilities. If ramps had stayed around a certain percentage of skaters would never have stopped. Now is a good time to promote it though, there are a lot of kids with talent out there.” (blunt 6/3 1999: 27)

Vert did not disappear completely, but remained a common style and vert facilities could still be found during my fieldwork between 2016 and 2020 in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban. But street was undoubtedly becoming the supreme discipline since the mid-1990s.

3.2.3 Social aspects of skateboarding during apartheid

Due to the previously described structural embedding of skateboarding in the South African society, skateboarding was for a long time a ‘White sport’. Although it did enjoyed some popularity among marginalised South Africans in the 1970s and 1980s, skaters of colour remained small in number. This was spatially evident by the fact that facilities were predominantly found in areas classified as

White during apartheid. The skateboarding industry was also completely White owned, as were large parts of the economy at the time (cf. Terreblanche 2002: 57).

Yet, within the White spheres of the South African society skateboarding maintained an ambivalent position. As a rebellious youth culture, skateboarding challenged White conservatives by playing with counter-cultural and subcultural symbolism. As an example, I would like to refer to a story in Fish Hoek, near Cape Town, that occurred around 1990. Skateboarder Terry November had built a vert-ramp for the owner of the local skate brand Southwind, Peter Wright. The business man selling skateboarding equipment promoted the local skate scene by providing a ramp that could be accessed by paying a membership fee. However, complaining about the brand's logo painted on the ramp supposedly looking 'satanist' (the logo consisted of a stylised 'S'), conservative Christians in Fish Hoek vandalised the logo and pressured Wright to remove it. A local politician intervened on behalf of the Christian activists and pointed out to Wright that he was in violation of a by-law that prohibited the stirring up of public nuisance. The ramp was then sold and moved to a skate shop in Sun Valley, a mall in the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town (cf. Masterson 2008a: 84). This episode illustrates that skateboarding was at-times marketed and perceived as a quite controversial sport that was associated with rebellious youth cultures and subcultures like the hippie movement, heavy metal, punk and hip hop, and therefore received rejection from conservative parts of the society. The symbolic world of skateboarding, which in the 1980s and early 1990s revolved largely around skulls-and-bones motifs reminding of heavy metal aesthetics, nurtured conflicts with religious groups in particular. But because of its rebellious image skateboarding was said to attract rather liberal-minded individuals critical of 'mainstream culture' and the apartheid-system, like Brian:

Brian: [P]eople always say like, or they focus on how Apartheid for example divided people of different race groups. But it also made South Africa very conservative within race groups. So skateboarding was very taboo and frowned upon within White communities. It wasn't socially acceptable. If you were a skateboarder you were kind of looked at as like trash or less than other people in the society. You couldn't get the product because people didn't want to bring the products in, because they had negative connotations and associations. So the people that skated here, like in the late 80s, early 90s, you had to really be passionate about skateboarding and import stuff or the guys I speak to say, if you knew of someone's parents going overseas, everyone like told the parents 'please, go to the shop and bring stuff back to us so we can get it'. You had to really try hard to be a skateboarder. And I think that is why the people that skated in like the White communities they were more open minded because in a way they were almost not oppressed like racially oppressed, but they were frowned upon or pressed by their peers in their community. And so they were people that were more open and accepting of people on the fringes.

From this perspective, skateboarding was particularly tolerant and welcoming of the marginalised, a narrative I often encountered during my research. Despite skateboarding being much more popular amongst the White population and White South Africans dominating the professional sphere, a small number skateboarders of colour achieved wider recognition during apartheid. Two well-known trailblazers in the Capetonian skateboarding scene were Errol Strachan and Arnold Lambert. As mentioned earlier, I was fortunate to meet the two local legends in person and had long conversations with Lambert in particular, who shared with me his perspective on the evolution of skateboarding since the 1980s. Strachan and Lambert had grown up in the Cape Flats, worked in the skate industry, became talented riders and the supposedly first sponsored skateboarders of colour in South Africa, travelling the country in the 1980s (Masterson 2008a: 85). However, exceptional talents like Strachan and Lambert were hardly honoured in the skateboarding media of the time. Only indirect hints can be found about their existence in surf magazines like *ZigZag*, such as the mention of Coloured skateboarder Terry November in an advertisement of the company Southwind, for which November rode a demo in Fish Hoek in 1990 (*ZigZag* 14/1 1990: 44). November was one of the few skateboarders in the Cape Flats of the late 1980s and early 1990s who had access to a vert ramp he had built in the backyard of his house and shared it with other skateboarders in the area. There were thus small skate scenes in marginalised sections of the population, but these were rendered invisible in the media discourse, their marginalisation further reinforced. This provided a parallel in the US context: There, too, skateboarders of colour, who existed in higher numbers than in South Africa, were not granted space in skate videos and magazines produced by White Americans (Williams 2020: 217f.). Consequently, the history of marginalised skateboarding in South Africa existed largely in an oral form and in private records. The above mentioned Errol Strachan, for example, had started to skateboard as a child in 1975 after seeing a few other kids in the neighbourhood riding boards, as he explained in an interview:

Strachan: But yeah, the first time I saw a skateboard I fell in love with it. I was 13, I was at school in standard six. I looked out my window and I saw some kids on skateboards, Clyde and Steph. And I saw them on skateboards, and I just looked and I said ‘I wanna do that!’. I just, I just knew, I want to do that whether I am good or bad at it, I don’t care, that looks awesome. And that is what I wanted to do.

Him and a circle of schoolfriends would later found the Comet Skate Club, involving roller skaters and skateboarders. Studying the American magazine *Skateboarder*, Strachan taught himself freestyle tricks and became one of the best freestyle skateboarders in the country (*blunt* 1/1 1997: 43). He

still had this reputation among many older skaters in Cape Town during my research. Strachan had also cultivated contacts with White skateboarders as early as the 1970s and skated in areas classified as White, like Muizenberg. In an interview he explained that he had rarely experienced racism among skaters. To the contrary, White skaters took side with him against police officers enforcing apartheid laws:

Strachan: There wasn't a race in skateboarding, we never saw that. You know, just like, even when I was before him [Lambert], like in the 70s I used to skate at Muizenberg and all the guys come and skate with me, and no problem. And then, they taught me how to surf, but every time I get kicked out by another guy.

Interviewer: I see.

Strachan: I wasn't allowed in the, in the water, you know, it was a Whites only beach, you know. So it was quite humiliating, but there was just, you know Bobby and those guys, they would just end up fighting with the cops. But then eventually the cops turned a blind eye and I used to skate there with them. And then, same with when I started hanging with Arnie, you know I noticed that the kids don't, they don't have like any issues about race, they can skate, you know skateboarding is like very much a soul-sport.

Interviewer: Ya.

Strachan: You know, its a soul sport, so, its just you and your board, and everyone recognized that talent in each other.

Strachan regularly visited skateparks in Muizenberg and Kenilworth, where White, Black and Coloured kids supposedly skated together. The skatepark in Kenilworth Centre was one of the few places he knew in Cape Town where apartheid segregation seemed to have not been enforced among the visiting skaters:

Strachan: Ya, I remember in the 70s with, when we had Comet Skate Club in Grassy Park, we used to walk to Muizenberg and go visit Pete and go skate with his guys, and check the ramp out, he had some ramp in, at that time already. And we go check them out. And then in Kenilworth they had a skatepark and we go there.

Lambert: KC?

Strachan: Ya, KC, ya, they had a skatepark, that was in the early 70s, eh. And we would go there and it was Black, White, Coloured kids together, there was no, there was no like Whites only allowed, because that would normally be that, you know, you would go to a cinema, its Whites only or Blacks only, or Coloured only.

Lambert: Or they would have a certain period that you can come.

Strachan: Ya, but the skatepark wasn't like that, it was actually the one place that wasn't like that. I actually, now when I think about it, it, it was non-racial, we just meet and then skate there.

Vice versa, good skate friends of Bong would also visit him in Grassy Park, practically transgressing the group areas. Such visits did require a certain amount of planning and the skater's parents support. This episode illustrates that although skateboarding was structurally embedded in the racist apartheid society and mainly accessible to the White population, and therefore developed the image of being a 'White sport', it was practised by South Africans of colour, too. In some contexts, it was a social space in which friendships transgressing racialised segregation were formed. The shared subcultural identity created a potential for solidarity across social divisions. Yet, skateboarders like Errol Strachan and Arnold Lambert were also exceptions to the norm. They were among the few skaters of colour who were reasonably successful in resisting structural forces and building good connections into the class privileged, White spheres of society. Both of them were not only passionate athletes, but they were lucky enough to work in the skateboarding industry as craftsmen, salesmen and paid performers at the same time. When I conducted my field research in the late 2010s, the two athletes were being recognised precisely for their exceptional role in 1980s South African skateboarding, being regarded as talented pioneers of a new, diverse era of skateboarding. Strachan was particularly exceptional in that he was still practising freestyle skateboarding way into the 1990s, a style that was almost extinct at the time. As late as 2001 readers of *blunt* could see a photo of Strachan doing a handstand on a skateboard in the skateboarding magazine *blunt* (5/5 2001: 28). In the special issues of *Session Magazine* and *Concrete Wave Magazine* on the history of skateboarding in South African, Strachan was prominently honoured together with his friend Arnie Lambert (Masterson 2008a, 2008b). Strachan also seemed to be the only skateboarder of colour of that era that some White skateboarders with a deeper knowledge of the history of the sport knew, precisely because he was recognised in skateboarding publications. But this was not the norm. Other talented riders, such as Lambert and November, seemed to be particularly unknown among White skateboarders because they were rarely or never visible in skateboarding media. The interplay of segregation and media politics could lead White skateboarders of the time into the belief that Skateboarder of colour did not even exist. The segregated realities enforced by the apartheid state thus affected skateboarding, by achieving effective segregation of lifeworlds along racialised attributions. When I asked Larissa, a White

South African woman in her 50s who had skateboarded in the 1970s, if there had been skateboarders of colour when she had been skating actively, she stated that she had never met any, but had also never thought about their existence (or absence):

Interviewer: Was skateboarding back then kinda a diverse environment despite the racial segregation?

Larissa: Not so hectic, he. No, I mean definitely in Muizenberg now I see like a lot of mixed, like when we are surfing, like in the streets it is very mixed. In those days no, not really. I don't even remember one.

Interview: So you saw only White people that were skateboarding?

Larissa: That is all I remember, whether Black people skated at home or in the streets, whatever, I did not see it. I mean now I see everybody on a skateboard. I see girls, older people, Black dudes, Coloured dudes, the guys who look after the cars, they are all on skateboards nowadays. But back then, no. [...] I never thought of that, actually, now that you mention it, I never thought of like if Black and White people skated.

Interview: I am actually trying to figure out if there were like separate skateboarding scenes in different parts of the city.

Larissa: That would be interesting to know that. Because I wasn't very aware. I mean as a youngster you are not aware, you know what I mean? You are just doing your thing.

Moreover, as was already suggested when referring to the experiences of Errol Strachan, the injustices of the apartheid society contributed towards a racialisation of skateboarding styles, and thus racialised class distinctions within South African skateboarding. Vert skateboarding required privileged access to resources and was structurally embedded into the lifeworlds of the White middle class (cf. Williams 2020: 243). In marginalised areas, skateboarding was practised well into the 1980s in the form of sidewalk surfing and freestyle skateboarding until street skateboarding gained increasing popularity. I learned from many marginalised skateboarders that the lack of access to parks and ramps was the central reason why vert skateboarding was almost non-existent in marginalised areas. Errol Strachan explained in an interview what role access to resources and architecture played in the development of his skate style:

Bong: And then everybody in my area did freestyle because we had no ramps.

Interviewer: Ya.

Bong: You know, all the ramps were in White areas so we couldn't go skate there, so that was also a fuckup. But, ya, it was an amazing part of my life, skateboarding. I mean to me a skateboard was, I travelled with it, it was my transport, you know, I went everywhere with my board.

The high relevance of the accessible physical surrounding for the development of one's skateboarding skills was also explained to me by the former professional street skateboarder, Arnold 'Amin' Grey. For Grey, whole areas and neighbourhoods developed distinct skate related, stylistic characteristics evolving from the given architectural realities. Grey himself had been shaped an excellent street skateboarder due to the lack of access to vert ramps, but with the inner city of Johannesburg in front of his doorstep:

Amin: Skateboarding is very different, every suburb here, skateboarding from Johannesburg to Cape Town is very different, but also skateboarding in Cape Town, skating in Sea Point is different from skating in town, skating in the townships. Because the environment is totally different, the environment definitely influences what you skate, how you skate, how, how exposed you are to skateboarding, you know. Yeah, it definitely changed. When I grew up in Johannesburg, where I lived there weren't any skateparks, so I grew up skateboarding street.

Especially during apartheid, primarily White South Africans had easy access to skateboarding facilities and could therefore follow the newest trends in the sport. Racialised class segregation led to the marginalised being found mainly in freestyle and later street, styles that required no special facilities (Masterson 2008b: 25; cf. Williams 2020: 246). Few exceptions, like Coloured vert skateboarder Terry November (ZigZag 14/1 1990: 44), were contrasted by a large number of nationally known, White vert professionals, like Haldane Martin, Dallas Oberholzer, Luis Peixoto and Greg Monnik (ZigZag 14/5 1990: 39-47). The demographics of skateboarding styles tended to be racialised and vert established itself as a style that was particularly strongly connoted with class privilege and whiteness. Yet, this would slowly change in the following decades with the general diversification of skateboarding's demography and through easier access to equipment, infrastructure and mobility by the wider society. From the late 1980s onwards, skateboarders increasingly turned to the street and vert was displaced as the 'supreme discipline' of skateboarding. The rise of Street played a considerable role in opening up the sport to the marginalised. By no longer requiring the use of exclusive architecture, but engaging in urban public space, skateboarding's accessibility was considerably boosted.



Illustration 3: Arnold 'Arnie' Lambert was one of the few skateboarders of colour in Cape Town in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and could be counted among the pioneers of South African street skateboarding. His work for the Capetonian surf and skate shop Surf Centre involved riding demonstrations at marketing events. Lambert stopped skateboarding in the early 1990s. He subsequently made his living as a carpenter, but had kept skateboarding as his great passion and had created a private collection capturing his sporting past. From this collection came this photo, which I photographed when visiting him in Elsie's Rivier in 2017.

3.3 Skateboarding during transformation and in post-apartheid South Africa

After tracing the historical development of skateboarding during the apartheid period, I now turn to the period around the transformation to democracy which coincided with the introduction of street skateboarding. The rise of street was first seen in the USA and quickly spilled over to South Africa. I therefore turn briefly to the development and popularisation of street skateboarding in the US context where it had become the commercially leading style in the country by 1987 (Borden 2001: 23f.). Since the early 1990s street was clearly dominating the skateboarding world (Borden 2001: 25). Other skateboarding disciplines like slalom, downhill and freestyle largely lost relevance with this paradigm shift. Vert skateboarding survived the street skateboarding ‘revolution’ (Schäfer 2020: 72), but would be thrown of the ‘throne’ of skateboarding culture. At least, skateboarding stars, like Tony Hawk, demonstrated that vert remained a somewhat valued realm within skateboarding culture (Mullen 2004: 222f.). But Street breathed fresh air into skateboarding and was to change the sport permanently.

The innovative core of street skateboarding was its innovative approach towards urban public space. Instead of bowls, ramps and waves made of cement, street skateboarders chose stairs, railings, curbs, walls, benches, banks and other typical elements of city architecture to perform tricks on. Instead of focusing on the beach (promenade) and dedicated skateboarding architecture, street skaters appreciated the material conditions of modern cities and flourished in the car-centred metropolises of the western world (Borden 2001: 180f.). The shift in spatial focus was reflected in changing practices. On the one hand, manoeuvres from freestyle and vert skateboarding were adapted to the street, modified and further developed (cf. Schäfer 2020: 69). For example, street caused an explosion of different variations of flip tricks, which were already known from freestyle but gained new significance by becoming a central element in street skateboarding. On the other hand, new manoeuvre types were invented or made relevant. The jumping technique of the ollie, supposedly developed by vert skateboarder Alan Gelfand in the late 1970s, became a necessary prerequisite for performing many tricks and went into the standard manoeuvre-repertoire of street skateboarders. Slides and grinds, ways of skidding over and on objects while standing on the skateboard, were considerably refined and developed. In particular, however, the combination of manoeuvres on all kinds of objects in urban space set street apart from the other interpretations of skateboarding. The focus of attention was no longer on flat or angled asphalt surfaces and ramps specially built for skateboarding, but rather on the active integration of modern urban architecture as it was given.

Street skateboarding was symbolically charged with a rebellious connotation, supported by links to American youth and popular cultures such as punk, metal and hip hop which gained much popularity in the 1980s and 1990s (Atencio/Beal/Yochim 2013: 159). ‘Thrasher’, which would quickly become the most well-known American street skateboarding publication, signalled the beginning of the new era and represented an aggressive, urban, raw, edgy, humorous, masculine, rebellious and cool interpretation of skateboarding (Mullen 2004: 147, 184f.; Weyland 2002: 167ff.):

“It was a provocative attitude that practically ordered skaters to stop blubbering and find places to skate. The undercover logistics, the boats, pontoons and other strategic materials ‘employed by our urban band of terrorists in their assault of this holy ground’ and the romance of empty pools where skaters ‘worshipped daily’ gave the prose of a quasi-mystical element. Needless to say, the act of trespassing was wholeheartedly promoted.” (Weyland 2002: 170)

Much more than vert skateboarding, it was street that tied a rebellious symbolism through clothing, music and product design to the sport (cf. Butz 2012: 208f.; Weyland 2002: 173f.). Even if skateboarding already had a quite rebellious, controversial image in the decades before due to its links with youth cultures and subcultures, and its tendency to transgress norms in urban public space, the developments since the late 1980s increased these attributions. On a symbolic and graphic level, this became apparent through the spread of ‘skull and bones’-motifs since the late 1980s, reminiscing punk rock and heavy metal culture (cf. Borden 2019: 244; Schäfer 2020: 89f.). Since the late 1980s elements from hip hop played an increasingly important role, especially with the use of graffiti-style graphics on skate products and rap music in skate videos. Skateboarding was increasingly associated with American urban culture (Schäfer 2018: 55).

Videos gained high significance for the popularisation of the inherently volatile new style, which coincided with the spread of home recording and playback technology, like VHS since the 1980s. Such technological innovations made it possible to give the practice a mediated permanence and make it visible to a global audience which could study and imitate it elsewhere. Moreover, with the advent of compact cameras, skaters could take the documentation of their practice into their own hands and low-budget video productions of amateurs increased in number over time (Borden 2020: 85; Dinces 2011: 1523; Dupont 2014: 4; Schäfer 2020: 223f.). This entanglement of sportive practice and media production was to be understood in the larger context of the emergence of so-called alternative sports, which were less constituted through the formation of institutional entities,

such as associations and clubs, and ritualised, collective events, like weekly competitions and regular joint trainings, than through individual practice, media-based dissemination and marketing, and sporadic commercial events. According to Wheaton and Beal

“[...] alternative sport cultures are ‘taste cultures’ in which the specialist subcultural media play a central role in disseminating information about their activities to their members, and the creation and circulation of the symbols and meanings of subcultural capital.” (Wheaton/Beal 2003: 157)

Media became a central element of the sport, going beyond the documentary character of photo and film recordings of the past. Via videos, manoeuvres could not only be documented on film, but they could also be dramatised using various film and production techniques. Street skateboarding was a characteristic example of a lifestyle sport in which practice and media production became tightly interwoven. Commercial interests played an important role in the formation of this connection, because a large part of produced media content was factually marketing material, especially in the early phase of street skateboarding. The emergence of street skateboarding created new incentives for the skateboarding industry worldwide. This was partly based on a very simple fact: Due to the rougher manner of use, the lifespan of equipment for street was much shorter compared to any other style. The equipment had to be as light as possible and was put under more strain through the character of typical manoeuvres and tricks in often rough urban environments (Borden 2001: 158). Decks and shoes had to be replaced more often due to increased wear and tear. Street thus provided the industry with a practice that encouraged its customers to (re)purchase its products in shorter intervals⁴⁹, creating a more stable and lucrative market environment⁵⁰.

Before the popularisation of street skateboarding, companies had organised demonstration events and competitions, sponsored magazines and placed advertisements on television to market their products (Borden 2019: 57). With VHS, later CD-ROMs and DVDs, and finally digital video clips, products could be marketed even more effectively. Yet, despite their use as marketing tools, commercially produced skate videos were not primarily understood in skateboarding culture as promotional videos, but as highly recognised and ‘authentic’ subcultural products (Borden 2019: 84;

49 Contrary to street in this respect was cruising on high-quality longboards, for example. Such longboards would last many years rather than a few weeks. This was due to the different use of the equipment, which was less subject to wear and tear or damage. Because longboards had to be replaced much less often, it was much more difficult for companies to live on the demand of a small population of athletes.

50 Especially around the production of products that are subject to high wear and tear in street skateboarding, such as decks, wheels, trucks, clothing and shoes, relatively stable industries were able to establish themselves, which no longer collapsed completely in troubled economic times, but showed greater stability against capitalist market dynamics due to a more constant demand.

Yochim 2007: 195; cf. blunt 7/3 2003: 39). The American company Powell-Peralta was a striking case in this regard and was often credited with having invented the format of skate films and videos, and therefore having had a fundamental impact on skateboarding culture (Beal/Wilson 2004: 35f.; Dinces 2011: 1523). To sell the company's skate products, Peralta decided to make commercials for which he recruited talented young skaters. 'The Search for Animal Chin' (1987), one of several skate films produced by Powell-Peralta, featured some of the most respected US skateboarders of the time and was a great success (cf. Borden 2019: 84f.). Further Powell-Peralta films like 'Public Domain' (1988) and 'Ban This' (1989) followed. Peralta's films had a great influence on the constitution of the genre of skate videos, which were less about documenting the skateboarding experience in its entirety as a practice, but rather resembled highlight-rolls: one clip of a successfully performed trick followed the next. In the subsequent development of skate videos, this approach was pushed further, as company owner Stacy Peralta emphasised in an interview:

“What's happened to skateboarding videos since that time, is they've just simply become action porn. There's no story. There's no context. It's just basically an inventory of tricks, one after the other, after the other. It doesn't even really show kids skateboarding. It just shows them doing the exclamation point. And the kids that even like these videos will tell you the same thing. There's no story. It's just porn.”⁵¹

With the format of skateboard films, Peralta had, in a sense, invented a new marketing technique creating the desire of children, teenagers and young adults to imitate what could be seen in the films which required to buy skate products (cf. Atencio/Beal/Yochim 2013: 159). The commercial success of the format caught Peralta by surprise both in terms of the tapes sold and the advertising impact, as he stated in an interview:

“The skaters watching the video loved it, but nobody had an idea it was going to sell 30,000 copies, or however many it did. The impact was so strong that we were getting calls from skateboard-distribution companies across the world. The Australian distributor called us and begged us to do another video. 'You must do a video every year, because these videos are helping grow the sport. You have to realize that for every kid who buys one, 100 are seeing it, and every one of them will buy skateboards.’” (Mortimer 2008: 120)

51 Camera in the Sun | Locations Under the Lens (18.03.2011): Camera Q&A: Stacy Peralta on L.A. gang, surf and skate culture [blog post], online-source: <http://camerainthesun.com/?s=peralta> [accessed: 25.06.2017].

The foundation for the close entanglement of skateboarding and media was thus laid in the second half of the 1980s. The constant search for new performances and environments that was documented and made globally visible through photos and videos became a central element of street skateboarding and started an era of curious experimentation. Videos allowed skaters around the world to get inspiration and recognition from each other. Video clips of successfully landed tricks became an important resource among skateboarders, conveying status and recognition in the scene (Beal 2013: 99; Schäfer 2020: 223). Video production and distribution played an important role in the continuous development of new tricks and innovative ways to ‘play’ with obstacles in urban space in the course of the 1990s and 2000s. Skate spots like the Carlsbad Gap in a Californian school, the Undercroft in London and the Brooklyn Banks in New York, became known worldwide among skateboarders because they were visible recurrently in photos and videos (Weyland 2002: 196f.). And of course, over the years, countless professional skateboarders have become known primarily for appearing in magazines and videos.

Benefiting from the media-assisted popularisation of street, skateboarding was able to assert itself culturally and economically permanently from there on. In the 2000s in particular, the sport became a multimillion dollar business in North America and Europe (Beal/Wilson 2004: 31f.; Borden 2020: 57; Schäfer 2020: 57). Skateboarding had also found its way into the ‘mainstream’ with ‘skater fashion’, skateboarding appearing in mass cultural products, television broadcasts of bigger events and countless videos circulating online. In western societies, skateboarding was increasingly taken into account in urban planning and architecturally promoted with skateparks. A dedicated sector of NGOs had emerged in the 2010s, utilising skateboarding in so-called social and developmental work. Through its integration into mainstream culture, skateboarding was increasingly regarded as a formal sport, countering the perception as a rebellious youth culture it never completely shed. This achieved its preliminary peak when skateboarding was approved for the Olympic Games in Tokyo 2020⁵² and was therefore officially accepted in the world of formally recognised sports (cf. Schäfer 2018: 60). Skateboarding had become a popular global sport and youth culture in the era of street. Its mythological centre had remained the USA.

52 International Olympic Committee (03.08.2016): IOC approves five new sports for Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 [website], online-source: <https://www.olympic.org/news/ioc-approves-five-new-sports-for-olympic-games-tokyo-2020> [accessed: 15.01.2019].

3.3.1 The spatial shift and changing demographics in western street skateboarding

With the popularisation of street skateboarding, the sport was becoming a physically tougher and even more masculine connoted activity than it already was in the decades before. Because of its physical character and high risk of injury, it was particularly suitable for performing masculinity while being in conflict with practices regarded as feminine (cf. Bourdieu 2005: 93f.; Connell 2005: 58; Peters 2016: 204; Porter 2003: 47f.). Performing challenging manoeuvres in hard concrete environments at high speeds and great heights, often without wearing protective gear, inevitably entailed pronounced physical risks and promoted a culture of uncompromising instrumentalisation of the body. In concert with the enrichment through symbols and practices of male dominated youth cultures, such as punk, heavy metal and later hip hop, skateboarding developed into a (hyper)masculine sphere. Through the provocative appropriation of public urban space, skaters now also offensively challenged the established order, which in patriarchal societies was largely a privilege of boys and men, and contributed to a more male dominated demography among street skateboarders (Abulhawa 2008: 56; Peters 2016: 95; Yochim 2007: 226). In the US, the marginalisation of girls and women was further fuelled by their exclusion from the (commercial) media discourse, letting street skateboarding appear as a social space where girls and women did not participate as athletes (Porter 2003: 37; Yochim 2007: 97). Elissa Steamer was practically the only woman in the 1990s and 2000s who played an active role as an athlete in recognised skate media in the US and was potentially the only female street skateboarder in this era that was regarded as being part of the otherwise male-only world of professional street skateboarding (Abulhawa 2008: 63; Porter 2003: 29). Moreover, popular skateboarding media in the 1980s and 1990s was remarkably sexist and homophobic in content (Schäfer 2020: 264). Only with the spread of feminist discussions in the social mainstream and the emergence of empowerment and diversity concepts did this tendency increasingly decline since the 2000s (cf. Yochim 2018: 191). Especially since the 2010s, girls and women have become more present among skateboarders and became more visible in skate media and renowned skate competitions, like the Street League, included female athletes in their own sections. The general erosion of stereotypical gender roles in the western world impacted skateboarding, but despite the changes the sport had remained a strongly male connoted activity with a preponderance of boys and men.

Yet, with the advent of street skateboarding, a diversification of the demography could be observed in relation to the race and class positions of its practitioners, as an increase in the number of class marginalised skateboarders and skateboarders of colour could be witnessed (Borden 2019: 26f.;

Schäfer 2018: 50; Williams 2020: 247). Early street skaters of colour, such as the American professional Ray Barbee, exemplified this development and “gained considerable status and visibility in skateboarding media” since the 1980s (Williams 2020: 218). This trend was further accentuated by professional skaters of the following generations, such as Stevie Williams, Kareem Campbell, Daewon Song and Zion Wright. This development was attributable to various causes. By turning to the inner cities, which in the USA of the 1980s and 1990s had largely become class and race marginalised spaces after the so-called white flight (Wilson 1980: 111f.), skateboarding moved spatially into the proximity of the marginalised. It no longer had to be practised in exclusive spaces, such as in (commercial) skateparks or in the vicinity of beaches. As the industry grew in size and products were produced in larger quantities, costs for equipment dropped and the sport became generally more affordable (Williams 2020: 243). In the racialised class society of the United States, this was tantamount to eased access for people of colour who were overrepresented in class marginalised positions. Consequently, the sport became much more diverse regarding the positions of practitioners in the racialised class society. As Schäfer (2020: 268) demonstrates, an increasing number of skaters of colour and of working class backgrounds entered the sport from the late 1980s onwards. Ken and Jay Sigafos commented on the demographic changes in skateboarding in an issue of Thrasher in 1992:

“The suburbs are the last bastions of middle class America, and therefore they hold the key to where vert came from and where it is going. If we look to where skating is most popular and least restricted the answer lies in the modern urban melting pot known as the big city. All races and creeds have access to the same pavement. No head trips, just your crew, your deck and free skating time. The majority of vert pros are kids from middle class backgrounds who have had access to skate facilities in their communities. On the other hand, some of the greatest street skaters have come from the worst parts of town and know the true meaning of street life.” (Thrasher 1992, 7: 28)

The increasing symbolic connection with urban youth cultures, like hip hop, countered skateboarding’s connotation with the lifestyles of the American White middle class and made the sport more accessible for marginalised children, adolescents and young adults (Yochim 2007: 15). Moreover, the growing number of Americans of colour among the middle and upper classes played a role in the demographic diversification (cf. Wilson 1980: 18). This ‘new’ group of consumers was increasingly targeted by the skateboarding industry which, consequently, developed an interest to display skateboarding as a diverse environment. This development was not limited to North America, but could also be observed in Western Europe.

The global popularisation of skateboarding further contributed to general social diversity of the sport and subculture, and its perception as a race and class diverse social space. In the 2010s, the US and Western Europe still owned the status of global hotspots of the sport, but small or larger scenes had developed in many areas of the world. Skateboarding had become a global phenomenon and developed a somewhat cosmopolitan self-conception. However, the world's most well-known and recognised skate companies and media producers had remained in the United States and largely in the hands of White Americans (cf. Williams 2020: 314). Diversification was predominantly evident among practitioners and professional athletes, but less so in the commercial sphere. The developments in the USA radiated to South Africa, where some parallels, but also numerous differences in the further development of street skateboarding became apparent. I will now take a closer look at the historical development of street skateboarding in the South African context.

3.3.2 Street skateboarding's rise in South Africa

In South Africa, street skateboarding was swiftly received and imitated due to the close ties to California. A young generation of skaters turned to the new style already in the mid-1980s and a small scene developed over the years. In 1988, skateboarding journalist Haldane Martin energetically called South African skateboarders to approach urban settings in innovative ways, imitating manoeuvres that had been developed and popularised in American street skateboarding:

“There is far more to Street Skating than just cruising down some street on a skateboard. Just cruising is OK, but if you want to have fun you've got to use your imagination so read on [...] Keep your eyeballs open for the following otherwise mundane obstacles: stairs to ollie down, curbs to grind, walls to ride, high places to acid drop, low walls to rail slide and banks to boneless on! The list goes on and on, just use your imagination.”
(ZigZag 12/3 1988: 43)

The most accessible template for the adaption of street in South Africa was provided by American videos and magazines mentioned earlier. American skateboarding films of the 1980s and early 1990s were regarded as trailblazing classics among many of my older informants as they provided insights into the new developments overseas and allowed local imitation (cf. Borden 2001: 182; Masterson 2008a: 83; ZigZag 12/1 1988: 34). These films were the ‘window to the world’ and an important source for skill development, especially in a country where skateboarding was a niche activity. But before the rise of the internet, obtaining new skate videos was not an easy task, as Ayusch, skateboarding since around 1990, explained to me. The hard-to-get media were therefore

shared and copied among skaters. When a skateboarder had procured a new, coveted skate film, the skateboarders would gather and watch the precious piece together, or copy video cassettes, CDs and DVDs for each other:

Ayusch: Because, online wasn't there, man. It was a, you know like, the first when I saw, I told you, one of this pro-videos was, I think it was, it wasn't maybe the H-Street, the Hokuspokus, it must have been a Bones Brigade Video, or, or H-Street, Hokus Pokus [...] How my friend got it, he's from a ghetto area in Newclare. He started at, his, his mum sent him to a private school, I don't know where. But the ous at that private school, there was a bunch of them used to skate. Obviously like White ous. And that's how he got that vid.

Interviewer: I see.

Ayusch: And then, on VHS cassette, dubbed it, and that's how everybody got their vids back then, dude.

Interviewer: Hmm hmm

Ayusch: Then there was also, some guy who stayed at our hood. He went to the UK for a while, when he came back, he brought the H-Street next generation tape. And then also, ous were hyped. And that's how it used to be back then. One person had a tape, and nobody else had seen it, because there was no google. One person had the tape, and then you were, 'hey guys, I have the tape', and then everybody is making a mission to that guy's house. Then its like a bunch of us just gone to watch that video for the first time, you know. That's how it used to be.

Due to the significantly smaller number of skateboard films compared to the 2010s, the 1990s and 2000s cohort of skateboarders in particular shared common memories of early 'classics', like Corbin:

Corbin: And then video tapes in those days were crazy, like or as a big thing, you know, like there weren't like, digital media wasn't that big back then. So whatever people had physically was like priceless, you know. It was like something, it was a collectible. I guess like I had a few videos for like so many years, but those first few videos, like 'Ismanic Marti' and 'Shorty's Fulfil the Dream' and a few like early like Transworld skateboarding videos. We just had like basically four little, like four cassettes and we were stuck with them for four years, watching them over and over again.

Without a doubt, street quickly became the new trend in South Africa a few years after it kicked off in the United States and Europe. Yet, up until the early 1990s, it still shared the stage with vert

skateboarding. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a general surge in skateboarding's popularity, linked in part to a fresh inflow of US capital nurturing the sport in South Africa, as Masterson's argues (Masterson 2008a: 83). Swiss company Swatch entered the South African market and advertised its products through vert skateboarding events. Furthermore, surfing-companies like Quiksilver, Island Style, Gotcha and Surf News invested into skateboarding. This brought new opportunities for athletes to make some money on the side through the sport. A small number of professionals like Eben Combrick, Peter Furneau and Sven Martin were even able to make a decent income for some time through sponsorships (Masterson 2008a: 84). More importantly, general accessibility to the sport was increased through the construction of new skateparks and ramps, many of which were commercial facilities catering to middle class skaters (Masterson 2008a: 84).

Street skateboarding found a fertile environment in late 1980s-South Africa. Its popularisation coincided with the demise of the apartheid regime. When the pillars of the apartheid order were crumbling one after the other since the mid-80s, skateboarders discovered new freedoms in the urban landscape, and were increasingly able to form social networks across the segregated urban landscape. However, it was only in the course of the more comprehensive reform process of the state and the latent pacification of social conditions – after all, the country was on the brink of a civil war from the mid-1980s until the transformation to democracy (cf. Beavon 1992: 232; Samara 2011: 30) – that access to a wide spectrum of urban areas became feasible. Under these changing circumstances and the chaotic conditions of the transformation period, inspired by the new approach of street skating, skateboarders started to explore the skateability of South African urban architecture. Preconditions for this were given in different ways in different cities. Some cities, such as Johannesburg and Durban, experienced profound socio-spatial changes in the 1980s and 1990s. The White Flight from the old Johannesburg CBD to the north of the city, for example, ensured that skateboarders could find unregulated or barely regulated spaces to exercise in once privileged areas when shops, office buildings and residential buildings were abandoned by White South Africans (cf. Steinberg/Van Uyl/Bond 1992: 266). But this was accompanied by dangers arising from the outbreaks of violence and escalation of crime. Ayusch recounted his observations of the changing situation in the old CBD of Johannesburg that he had made on his skateboard since the early 1990s:

Ayusch: Like I told you, that was the other thing, all the people, the young professionals, and even some of these guys from Randburg, Sandton, their parents used to work, and also some of them properly lived there in fucking the flats and shit in town [Johannesburg CBD]. That is in the apartheid days, you know. They had businesses in town. And when that shit got bad many people moved out and then the malls started getting built.

Interviewer: I see.

Ayusch: But that time I was too small to understand, eventually, when I think about it now, I realise, like, what the story is, you see. We were somewhere in the middle of it, just like, we were just.

Interviewer: You witnessed the transformation.

Ayusch: And even when you skate some of the spots, it wasn't like Black ous who were chasing us away, it was fucking Boer ous that were chasing us away. [...] And now we are getting jacked by fucking Black ous, you see. So like, we have been around so long, you check how things has changed.

Some Johannesburg street skateboarders, who had been active in the early 1990s, had experienced escalations of violence at first hand, such as the Shell House Massacre in 1994 near the ANC headquarters. In the years around the transformation process, new freedoms opened up, but new threats emerged, especially regarding political violence and violent crime. The White entrepreneurs fleeing the violent realities, many of whom moved from the old CBD to Sandton in the north, left behind little regulated spaces. George remembered how under these circumstances new opportunities opened up for street skateboarding:

George: And the cool thing with Johannesburg for me is always gonna have the best scene, because I came from it. Its industry is all messed up, like, there is no stores and everything is fucked, but the rawness of like street skating there was always what I loved, you know like, just going out and just being in the middle of the most crime-fucked city on earth, but I mean, but that also meant you could get away with a little bit more, you know what I mean, maybe not get kicked out everywhere or, but it was still a bad thing, you still got kicked out, that's just the nature of skateboarding.

In the years before and after 1994, especially due to the discontinuation of state-enforced residential segregation, new opportunities to build social connections arose. Yusuf had grown up in Yeoville in Johannesburg, in the early 1990s the neighbourhood was known for its rather liberal-minded residents from a diversity of backgrounds. Exemplarily, Yusuf's story illustrates how in post-apartheid South Africa opportunities for the formation of diverse groups slowly opened up:

Yusuf: And the guys I grew up with, we grew up in a place that was like Obs[ervatory in Cape Town], Yeoville [in Johannesburg] was like Obs.

Interviewer: Ya.

Yusuf: All sorts of people, like the rastas, the skinheads, the punks, the metalheads, all the, the teenage pregnancies, the mixed marriages, the artists, they all lived in one neighbourhood. And our crew was very diverse, we had different and, and all colours of people, which wasn't normal in Johannesburg in that time. So when we were skating wherever we went people always were like shocked to see that kids hanging out together.

While the inner city of Johannesburg was increasingly appropriated by class marginalised members of society, a new potential for diverse social interaction and networking emerged. At the same time, the class privileged, largely White sections of society retreated to privileged suburbs and privatised spaces, which in the case of Johannesburg were primarily found in the north. There, skateboarding was mainly practised in (commercial) skateparks, secluded from the socially diverse but also more dangerous streets of the inner city. But some skateboarders from the city's privileged suburbs still chose to explore the inner city architecture, and would meet other skateboarders gathering and exercising there. The skateboarding scene began to diversify and differentiate itself.

Yet, such developments arose in different ways in different parts of the country. In contrast to Johannesburg, there was no fundamental socio-spatial change in the sense of a 'white flight' and radical demographic change of neighbourhoods in Cape Town. The rather sharp segregation of Cape Town with the wealthy Northern and Southern Suburbs on one side, and the impoverished Cape Flats on the other, remained a defining characteristic after 1994. The inner city continued to act as a privileged sphere structurally excluding the marginalised to the periphery. The city government's policies even led to a intensification of the racialised class segregation, with the poor population being pushed out of the inner city and to the fringes. After the end of apartheid, however, it was no longer racist legislation that was the basis for forced relocations of South Africans of colour, but it was now economic dynamics, such as gentrification, that led to the expulsion of people of colour, most of them economically marginalised, from the city centre (Booyens 2012: 51). The stability of the economy and the class privileged character of Cape Town's old CBD was preserved and even augmented after transformation to democracy (Samara 2011: 69ff.). In contrast to the multicentre-structure of Johannesburg, Cape Town's socio-spatial divisions were not shaken (Samara 2011: 4). While the lack of regulation in Johannesburg's CBD opened up opportunities for skaters, in Cape Town the city government's regulation of skateboarding ensured that no public skate spot could establish itself as a meeting place in Cape Town's inner city in the long term. Some public spaces, like Thibault Square and City Center, served for some time as popular spots in the city where the scene met. But over the years the city government intensified measures to sanction skateboarding in

public. A bylaw introduced in 2007 made skateboarding illegal in public space, except in dedicated skateboarding facilities.⁵³ Yusuf recounted his memories of the changing situation in Cape Town's inner-city:

Yusuf: When I came to Cape Town we had the equivalent here of LBGs [famous skate spot in Johannesburg] which was Thibault Square. And there were times where you go to Thibault Square and you get there, and it was like 60 people skateboarding. And that was the that was like, I think more representative of a skate spot being a skate spot. [...] But what happened was they actually outlawed skateboarding at Thibault Square, so it became a bust and they would confiscate peoples skateboards and arrest people. And then after, three years after that it just was no longer a skate spot.

In contrast to Johannesburg street skateboarding's development in Cape Town was specific in that it resembled not so much an appropriation of marginalised and neglected urban spaces, but rather an appropriation of architecture situated in privileged and representative spaces. Erroll Bong had warm memories of that time when skaters from many parts of the city were bumping into each other in the city and undertook 'missions' together in the once White group areas of Cape Town:

Bong: And we used to do lots of street skating together in the 90s. I used to do freestyle, when all of the street skaters learned how to ollie, but I never could get that right properly. But that's some cool tricks, but ya. And, ya, we used to go out and skate public places, you know, stairs, wherever there was stairs, handrails, guys used to do that. And, ya, skaters used to hang out together a lot, you always hang out, everybody used to meet on a Saturday afternoon and go skate Civic Center Centre or just spots together, you know. And it was just good fun.

Due to the different developments in Cape Town and Johannesburg, the conditions that street skateboarders found were thus quite different. What both cities had in common was that new opportunities for skateboarders opened up and street skateboarding promoted the emergence of diverse skate scenes in the context of transformation and democratisation. With the end of apartheid and the political liberation of the non-White majority, skateboarding became much more accessible and skaters were able to forge bonds across socio-spatial divides. The preconditions were created for the emergence of a diverse street skateboarding scene regarding race and class of the athletes,

53 Openbylaws.org.za (28.09.2007): Streets, Public Places and the Prevention of Noise Nuisances [document], Openbylaws.org.za, online-source: <https://openbylaws.org.za/za-cpt/act/by-law/2007/streets-public-places-noise-nuisances/eng/> [accessed: 24.06.2020].

which increasingly formed since the late 1980s and especially in the early 1990s, and truly took shape around the millennium.

Media again played an important role for fuelling skateboarding in the course of the 1990s. Skateboarding was featured in South African surfing publications on the side until the early 1990s. There had not been magazines dedicated to skateboarding as in the USA and in Europe. But in 1990, the surfing magazine ZigZag undertook a first attempt to publish a pure skateboarding magazine titled 'Skate Edge'. Yet, the side-project brought it to only a couple issues before it was discontinued, hinting the rapid loss of skateboarding's popularity in the years before transformation to democracy. Although ZigZag confidently announced in 1990 that skateboarding was on a strong upswing⁵⁴ and would therefore receive more attention in its side-project (ZigZag 14/5 1990: 46), skateboarding was actually illuminated for the last time that year and disappeared as a topic from the magazine completely. This loss of popularity in the early-mid 1990s could be observed worldwide, the developments in South Africa were not exceptional in this respect (Schäfer 2018: 45). But at least in 1990 and 1991, skateboarding received another short boost of public exposure, popularity and commercial success. Skateboarding seemed so trendy at the time that numerous larger companies sponsored competitions and athletes, and the sport appeared recurrently in the program of television channels:

“Skateboarding was on the TV all the time too. Junior Topsport seemed to be sadly the media leader in showcasing some SA skating, and oddly enough they sent Brett Wolmarans and some other backward-ass chick to the contests in Munster, Germany. There were all these really oddly sponsored contest series' going on. Companies like Spur, Wimpy, Milky Lane and Tropica somehow got their corporate claws into it. There was a National Skateboarding Association. There were 'SA Champs'. If you rode for anyone, it was Look Ahead, Boogaloos, Quiksilver, Hardcore Skates, Forbidden World, Skates International, Surf Centre, Island Style, Southwind and if you were Sven [Martin], Swatch. Skate Edge magazine came out once or twice, and there was an extravaganza hype demo at the Standard Bank Arena for three days with Tony Hawk and Ray Barbee in January 1991. Skateboarding was huge.” (Day 2008a: 29)

Particularly noteworthy in the world of skateboarding was the release of the first South African street skateboarding film. 'Taking out the Trash' (1990) was produced and released by Peter Webb

54 In 1990, the ZigZag editorial team attributed the revived popularity of skateboarding in particular to its economic profitability: “The first edition [of the skate magazine Skate Edge] was hot and skater's [sic] were stoked that they had a South African skate mag. Advertisers were stoked too, they finally had a medium through which to advertise and in so doing, were able to communicate with the skate masses – and sales boomed” (ZigZag 14/5 1990: 46). From an economic perspective, the general weakness of the South African economy culminating in its crash in 1996 might have contributed to the downfall of the skateboarding industry of the early 1990s (cf. Bond 2000: 49; Natrass/Seekings 2011: 568).

and gained cult status in the following years. With the film, Webb imitated the rather rough style of the American Powell-Peralta street skateboarding films. A number of major skateboard events and shows created further public visibility for the sport and subculture, too. For such events, professionals from the USA were flown in time and again to demonstrate the latest developments in skateboarding. This was not only related to equipment and riding techniques, but also to the increasing diversity of the sport. For example, the well-known Zorlac team travelled through South Africa in 1990, and in 1991 Tony Hawk and Ray Barbee, the latter being one of the first prominent Black skateboarders during the early street skateboarding era in the United States, gave public performances. The events attracted thousands of visitors and were, in many cases, televised (ZigZag 15/1 1991: 42ff.; ZigZag 15/2 1991: 38f.). The company Boogaloos provided competitive opportunities for local skateboarders with the SA Champs in 1992 in Cape Town (Masterson 2008a: 85). One year later, the SA Street Championships were held in Durban. After the transformation to democracy, in December 1997, Boogaloos brought acclaimed US-skateboarders, among them Chad Muska, Bob Burnquist, Jamie Thomas and Geoff Rowley, to the country. According to Masterson, South Africa became a “regular stop for international street skating tours” of American professionals since the mid-2000s (Masterson 2008a: 89). Such events were important in the pre-internet era for local skaters to get practical inspiration from professional skaters, absorb trends from overseas and feel part of a global skate community. Accordingly, many older skaters held warm memories of such events which in many cases provided a unique opportunity to meet the stars of US skateboarding. Yet, before skateboarding would become a permanent sight in South Africans sport and youth cultural landscape, it lost much popularity and public visibility again in the years before the transformation to democracy:

“From about mid ‘91 – mid ‘92 skateboarding had gone from popular to practically despised. The yo-yo had passed, the hula hoop was done, and if you hadn’t moved on to the next thing – which seemed to be either basketball, rollerblading or some metal militia vibe – you were a loser.” (Masterson 2008b: 29)

‘Core’-skateboarders didn’t stop riding during this downtime, but there was hardly any public attention, hardly any events and media coverage, and getting quality skate products was difficult. From the late 1990s onwards, however, skateboarding finally consolidated itself as a sport and youth culture, and was not to experience another comprehensive loss of popularity in North America, Western Europe and also South Africa. In South Africa, this was signalled by the appearance of blunt magazine. With the publication of blunt in 1997, South African skateboarding

got its first consistent and countrywide coverage. Again, the magazine was published under the wing of the surfing magazine ZigZag, however, this connection hardly played a role in the publication itself. Although the magazine was generally focused on ‘action sports’ or ‘extreme sports’, it did include a large, dedicated section on skateboarding, primarily featuring street skating, and therefore gave the sport a consistent exposure (Masterson 2008a: 85). Those interested in skating were offered photo spreads, journalistic articles, interviews and letters to the editor. The magazine bore witness to the establishment of street skateboarding as a popular, albeit niche, youth culture. The Durban based magazine proudly announced in 1997 that skateboarding’s popularity was on the upswing:

“Skateboarding’s popularity in Durban is on the rise once again. The Durban scene has been underground and generally ignored since the early 90s when the last wave of popularity subsided. It however looks set for a large, perhaps even permanent return to prominence. Blunt is itself an acknowledgement that skateboarding is a big enough sport to give coverage to. The evidence is on the streets, where groups of young skaters can be seen everywhere [...].” (blunt 1/2 1997: 58)

Blunt followed the US-American trend of the time and moved skateboarding into the proximity of extreme sports like downhill mountainbiking, big wave surfing, skydiving and snowboarding, and popular youth cultures like hip hop, punk and heavy metal. The sport and its athletes were depicted as reckless, cool, rebellious and laid back. Although the magazine was still pervaded by vulgar humour, and latent sexism and racism, for the first time the impact of apartheid was discussed in a South African skateboarding-publication and voices of marginalised skateboarders were included (blunt 1/1 1997: 43; blunt 3/2 1999: 16; blunt 5/2 2001: 6, 30; blunt 7/3 2003: 39; blunt 7/4 2003: 34; blunt 7/8 2003: 56). For this reason, the magazine is an important source documenting the social diversification of South African skateboarding after transformation to democracy.

3.3.3 Street Skateboarding’s development since the 2000s

During the 2000s, skateboarding continued to entrench itself more firmly in the socio-cultural and economical landscape. Although it still encountered ups and downs of capital investment, and therefore a coming and going of commercial facilities, skate shops, events and media productions, it was not fundamentally shattered anymore as a youth culture and commercial market. Increasingly it was recognised and represented in ‘mainstream’ media (cf. Schäfer 2018: 49f.). Street skateboarding was brought to public attention in South Africa on television. Two skateboard related

TV shows, Boardriders TV and Kurb skateboarding, even occupied a regular place in the television landscape for some time, the latter being broadcasted in Afrikaans (Day 2008: 38). Media productions from the scene itself were particularly important. The long running, professionally made video series 'AV Skateboarding' and skateboard magazine Session played an important role to create a nationwide media discourse enabling identification with an imagined community of South African skateboarders (Day 2008b: 38). Session would eventually displace blunt as the most important publication for South African skateboarders. The monthly magazine Session, which at the time of my field research was freely distributed in paper form in shops and skateparks, or simply passed between skaters, but could also be accessed online, was completely financed through advertisements. Mainly composed of large-format images of sophisticated trick sequences, discreet, clean design, skate tour reports and interviews with skaters and crews, it embodied a serious, dry, aesthetically rather minimalistic and modern interpretation of skateboarding. Articles in Session were hardly marked by the adolescent silliness, vulgar and 'edgy' humour that was characteristic of blunt. The magazine also fed the local video discourse with sporadically produced and published videos of ambitious local skateboarders.

Besides skateboarding's appearance in mass and subcultural media, the sport being featured since the late 1990s and early 2000s in the highly popular videogame series Tony Hawk Pro Skater deserves attention. Hawk was at the time of my fieldwork still among the most well-known professional skateboarders worldwide and the videogame had certainly helped to make him known to the mainstream public. Hawk had also visited South Africa for various events since the 1990s. In Durban, a skatepark had actually been designed by Hawk himself and opened at the Wave House in 2001 (blunt 6/1 2002: 10; blunt 6/2 2002: 30-34). The first video game advertised by the professional athlete was released in 1999 for video game consoles and personal computers. Being a commercial success, the game spawned several sequels and spin-offs in the following years. Globally, the game had likely played a role in making street skateboarding visible to the mainstream and increasing the sport's popularity⁵⁵ (cf. Howell 2005: 34). From my own experiences in Germany, I knew how the game, when it came out, introduced professional street skaters and skate terminology to children and young people who had no other connection with skateboarding. This also seemed to have been the case in South Africa and the game was repeatedly mentioned as an important source of inspiration by skateboarding informants who had started to skate in the late 1990s and 2000s:

55 Omblor, Matt (04.09.2019): Interview: 'It inspired a generation': Tony Hawk on how the Pro Skater video games changed lives, The Guardian, online-source: <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2019/sep/04/tony-hawks-pro-skater-playstation-games-skateboarding> [accessed: 19.06.2020].

Corbin: So first we had bikes, and we'd ride bikes, then we became friends. Then we played soccer in the streets. And then like from there, we, we had playstations, playstation ones. And eventually Tony Hawk's came on. From there we were playing the game and we've pretty much finished the game, and we unlocked the videos, all the pro skaters in the game, and it was at that stage when, I was like 'I don't know how they do this, it just looks amazing'. I remember looking at Koston doing nollie-heelflip-crooks and stuff like that. And like just Jamie Thomas ollieing down huge gaps and, Elissa Steamer, Kareem Campbel, all the skaters like at that time, watching their videos, unlocking them and then the vocab[ular] of the game, learning the vocab, playing the game and learning the vocab of skating through that. So it drew me in further. From there, it was about Christmas 1999 when I could afford maybe my own first board.

The video game series was an impressive example of how skateboarding, through its connections to other popular cultures and media, could achieve considerable visibility and publicity despite its niche existence. The popularity and powerful marketing of the game was underlined in 2002 when the release of the fourth instalment was celebrated with events in Durban, Pretoria, Jeffrey's Bay and Cape Town (blunt 6/7 2002: 15). Later, the popularity of the video game series seemed to wane, but countless other games appeared for game consoles and mobile phones. They still seemed to play a role in introducing skateboarding to children and teenagers.

Generally, professional skaters from the US and Europe visited the country with greater frequency since the 2000s, inspiring local skateboarders and emphasising the connection of South African skateboarding to the (imagined) global community of skateboarders. Some South African skaters, such as Dallas Oberholzer and Greg Finch, also made a name for themselves by successfully competing overseas and entering sponsorship deals with western companies. But above all, a growing number of skate crews was out and about in South African cities to make use of public architecture (Masterson 2008a: 87ff.). Vert skateboarding remained a vivid style in South Africa despite being thrown from the throne of popularity by street skateboarding. In this context, the company Boogaloose played an important role as the country's biggest commercial chain selling equipment and as the operator of a larger number of vert skateparks in and around malls in bigger cities. In fact, Boogaloose seemed to have gained a near-monopoly on commercial skateparks in South Africa in the 2000s (blunt 6/5 2002: 8). The vert scene in South Africa was hit correspondingly hard when the company fell into crisis in the course of the 2010s and a large number of skateparks were closed in the process. Until then, however, Boogaloose helped keep Vert alive, especially among middle class skaters who could afford to use the commercial parks.

Generally, the skateboarding market and associated industries grew in volume and stability. The skate industry in South Africa remained a rather small sector, but it benefited from the general boom of the skate industry in the western world. New job opportunities arose around the sport, such as marketing of skate related products, event management, team management, equipment production in factories or workshops, sale of equipment in shops or via mail order, skatepark construction and operation, media production, product design (especially clothing), web design, production of (online) magazines, social entrepreneurialism and numerous other fields of work (Day 2008: 41; Masterson 2008a: 41). However, the persistently difficult economic situation in South Africa, which made imports of equipment and products vital to the survival of the skate industry costly and generally had a negative impact on the nation's purchasing power, certainly hindered the accessibility of and economic opportunities around the sport (cf. Bond 2017: 31f.; Natrass 2011: 570f.; Terreblanche 2002: 423f.). In South Africa, skateboarding remained a relatively difficult market characterised by the constant coming and going of companies and brands. Local skate companies often survived only a few years and were outlived by international corporations. Viking Skateboards, founded in 2003, claimed to have sold the first signature boards for local pros. In 2004, Adrian Day and Gavin Morgan founded Familia Skateboards: The company produced the first internationally acclaimed South African skate film 'Bang Chong' (2007) (Masterson 2008a: 88f.). Such local companies helped to make equipment more affordable and the sport more accessible. Yet, although skateboards were sold under the name of local brands, they were still often just imported products, mainly from China and the USA. Especially decks had to be imported due to the unsuitability of wood growing in the Southern hemisphere. Still being dependent on product imports, South African skaters continued to suffer from the poor international exchange rate of the South African rand (blunt 6/2 2002: 57).

But this did not hinder that skateboarding established itself more firmly in the 2010s. Close-knit, small skate scenes had developed in larger cities like Cape Town, Johannesburg, Durban and Pretoria, with Cape Town having the densest network of skateboarders, underlined by the large number of public skateparks. Skateparks built in other parts of the country, such as in Port Elizabeth and Kimberly, demonstrated that skateboarding had become recognised as a sport worthy of state subsidising, and was increasingly considered as an element of public park construction and neighbourhood revitalisation projects. The sport's recognition in urban planning certainly fostered the long-term stability of the sport in a similar way to North America and Western Europe. However, this was the case to different extents in South African cities. While Johannesburg featured only a handful of public skateparks, the city of Cape Town had built 18 until the mid 2010s. In some

neighbourhoods, skateboarding thus became an architecturally very accessible leisure activity. Commercial skateparks, many of them found in malls, contributed to the diversity of available skateboarding architecture, at least for middle class skateboarders. In the long term, Cape Town and Johannesburg saw an increase in quality facilities, the sport was increasingly promoted with public and commercial skateparks in the late 2010s.

Furthermore, the contest landscape was alive and picking up momentum. Of particular notability in recent history was a commercial event in Kimberley. In 2011 and 2012, the wealthy American Maloof-brothers included Kimberley as a contest destination for the Maloof Money Cup, an international street skateboarding competition. To provide an appropriate facility for the event, a high quality skatepark was built in Kimberley by a Californian company. The government subsidised the project as part of supposed efforts to establish “the province [Northern Cape] as a prime extreme sports destination”⁵⁶. From 2013, the contest was repeated annually under the name Kimberley Diamond Cup. Well-known US pro skateboarders joined the event, and skateboarders from all parts of the country took part in the contest. However, the Kimberley Diamond Cup came under severe criticism when serious corruption allegations were raised in 2018 and 2019.⁵⁷ In consequence, the event was discontinued.

Apart from other big events and sports festivals, smaller trick skateboarding events and contests were organised more or less continuously by companies, NGOs, crews and individual skateboarders. Such events were held in skateparks, parking lots and sometimes at popular skate spots. They provided a constant stream of competitive formats bringing the loosely organised scene together and making skateboarding visible to the general public. More commercially oriented events with bigger budgets, like Ultimate X in Cape Town, provided skateboarding a platform for a larger (mainstream) audience and kept its connection to so-called ‘extreme sports’ alive. Among the more unusually public events featuring skateboarding was a performance of Moses Adams involving the then Premier of the Western Cape, Helen Zille. In April 2015, before the official start of a street contest in a government building, Adams performed an ollie over Zille sitting on a stairset, with her feet sitting on a board of the Cape Flats skateboarding crew 20sk8.⁵⁸ This exemplified that professional skateboarders were increasingly valued as recognised athletes by the

56 media update (08.10.2013): Kimberley Diamond Cup proves a roaring success, media update, online-source: <https://www.mediaupdate.co.za/publicity/56998/kimberley-diamond-cup-proves-a-roaring-success> [accessed: 18.12.2020].

57 Friedman, Daniel (13.08.2018): Northern Cape govt accused of ‘criminal conduct’ in skateboarding event, The Citizen, online-source: <https://citizen.co.za/news/south-africa/1994917/northern-cape-govt-accused-of-criminal-conduct-in-skateboarding-event> [accessed: 18.06.2020].

58 Blokpoel, Teigue (06.05.2015): Zille’s office: Red Bull Unlocked 2015: Cape Town, Mahala, <http://www.mahala.co.za/sport/zilles-office> [accessed: 19.06.2020].

wider society. Two decades after the end of apartheid, professional skaters like Dlamini Dlamini, Moses Adams, Yann Horowitz, Khule Ngubane and Jean-Marc Johannes proved again and again that South African skateboarding had become internationally competitive.

An outright game-changing development for skateboarding was the rising accessibility and relevance of social media platforms in the 2000s and 2010s. Social media channels massively reduced the importance of professional media productions. Through the online sharing of pictures and videos, skateboarders were now able to engage directly in the subcultural media discourse, they were much less dependent on mediation by professionals as previous generations. Access to the internet provided, every skater could easily post photos or videos online and build up his or her individual, media profile, and engage in conversations with skaters elsewhere. Social media further increased the visibility and accessibility of skateboarding, and certainly contributed to its popularisation as a sport and a tool of self-expression. In conjunction with established publications, social media massively contributed to the development of a well connected nationwide skate scene (Session 50 2012: 57).

An important question regarding the assessed popularity of the sport is that of the number of active skaters in the past and present. Yet, estimating the number of skateboarders in South Africa, especially in retrospect, is no easy task. I was not able to find reliable sources in this regard, if any at all. When asked, most skateboarders could often only provide rough guesses, if at all. This is not surprising when dealing with an informal sport in which practitioners were loosely organised and in which sports clubs or similar bodies did not play a role. Moreover, a fundamental methodological difficulty in this regard is to define who is to be counted under the category 'skateboarder'. After all, skateboarding was enjoyed as a children's game and sporadically practised hobby throughout its history, especially during phases of high popularity. Many households certainly owned skateboards, but used them as sporadically as other sports and recreational equipment in their possession. And particularly 'core skateboarders tend to draw strict boundaries as to who is considered an 'authentic' skater and who is not. Based on my observations in Durban, Johannesburg and Cape Town, conversations with skateboarders and media coverage, I estimate that there were a few thousand active skateboarders in the country in the later 2010s, taking into account beginners and occasional riders. The ambitious core of the countrywide street skateboarding scene hardly comprised more than one hundred individuals. Only about a handful of athletes could be called professionals in the sense that they actually made an income through the sport and were recurrently featured in national and international media. Yet, when compared to mainstream sports, skateboarding was clearly a niche sport, even after its growing popularity in the recent past.

A remarkable development in South African skateboarding's younger history was the shift of the hotspot of skateboarding from Johannesburg and Durban to Cape Town. Influential commercial players had all moved to Cape Town, and professional skateboarders and individuals who tried their luck in the industry would follow (Session 50 2012: 44f.). During my fieldwork between 2016 and 2020, Cape Town was regarded the capital and economic centre of South African skateboarding. One could find a couple skate- or surf shops in Durban and Johannesburg, but this was not comparable to the greater number of shops in Cape Town. All of the more prestigious companies maintained a presence in Cape Town, and the two companies involved in building skateparks nationwide were based there. The majority of professional skateboarders lived in Cape Town as well, including the country's top skateboarders Khule Ngubane, Dlamini Dlamini, Moses Adams and Yann Horowitz. The small team of the skateboard magazine Session resided in the city and a number of NGOs offered skateboarding programs for children and youth. The compact, relatively quiet city centre and numerous skateparks provided good conditions for the emergence of a lively scene. Although street and vert scenes were also found in Johannesburg, Pretoria and Durban, the sport was much more visible in Cape Town. The surfing and beach culture, and tourism undoubtedly contributed to the popularity of the sport. In the 2010s, Cape Town was, in other words, the national epicentre of South African skateboarding and the hub of the skateboarding industry.

3.3.4 Demographic shifts in South African skateboarding after apartheid

After having illuminated the historical development of skateboarding in South Africa, I will examine the demographic changes the sport underwent with and after transformation to democracy (cf. Masterson 2008a: 86). Like all other spheres of society, skateboarding was touched by the upheaval in South Africa and increasingly opened up to a more race and class diverse demographic. In this respect, it mirrored developments in North America and Western Europe with a slight delay, where, particularly in street skateboarding, there was a significant increase in diversity since the 1980s (Williams 2020: 217f.). Numerous South African skateboarders who had been active during that time told me about their observations of the slowly increasing race and class diversity of skaters in the surrounding. George, who had engaged in skateboarding since 1989, rode as a sponsored skateboarder in the course of 1990s and knew the South African skate-scene very well, experienced the slow demographic change of the sport in inner-city Johannesburg:

George: When we, when we skating, you know, yeah when we started skating there wasn't any Black dudes, like, or when I started, you know, because there was like apartheid and I started like around 89 or something like that. It wasn't really, there was like occasional like, like dudes like this, possibly not a lot, it was more of kinda like in the 90s downtown [Johannesburg], there was this guy Steve Dlamini, he was like a guy like early 90s. I remember him being like one of the first like really good Black dudes. And then, and then I guess like slowly more dudes started like turning on to it or whatever. But, I, for me personally I think the biggest shift was, besides political shit, I don't really want to talk about political stuff. But we all started skating like downtown Johannesburg, like the city, and filming and doing all that stuff. And it was like, and then everyone would meet at Library Gardens, did you, did you go there?

Interviewer: Ya, I have spent quite some time there.

George: So that was like the meeting point and then everyone, basically my point is like as that was happening, so sort of like late 90s, early 2000s, like a lot more like kids where coming in from the townships.

Interviewer: Ah, ya.

George: Yeah. And I think when we started skating in town [early 1990s] it was like maybe 80 percent White and then, now [2017] it is probably like 90 percent Black, you know.

While there had been some athletes of colour before, with the end of the apartheid regime and the popularisation of street skateboarding since around 1990, skateboarding slowly approached a representation of the country's demography as marginalised children and young adults gained access to the sport. Similar to the American context, street skateboarding in South Africa was often regarded as being in connection with urban youth cultures. It loosed its connection to surfing and beach culture, and approached public urban spaces forming (symbolic) ties to urban subcultures and youth cultures like hip hop, punk rock and heavy metal (cf. Borden 2020: 33; Schäfer 2018: 50; Yochim 2007: 205). It was increasingly perceived as being an element in a larger subcultural cosmos (cf. Schäfer 2020: 131). In this process, skateboarding's connotation with whiteness was increasingly weakened, while the sport became more closely associated to Black urban and youth cultures, especially hip-hop. The action sports magazine *blunt* commented on this development in 2001:

"Sports formerly seen as 'white' are now growing in popularity in previously disadvantaged areas as this generation becomes integrated and activities seen as 'ghetto' such as tagging and b-boying have many followers in affluent areas. [...] the previously separated races are interacting on a level never seen before. Despite residual racist

mindset amongst some, the younger a person is right now, the less likely he is to see a person in terms of race, and more in terms of a human being whom he relates to through common activities. [...] Hip hop culture - tagging, breakdancing, DJs - and other related music genres such as ragga [...], and street sports such as skateboarding, BMX and to a lesser extent, inline, surfing and bodyboarding [...], have all boomed separately in the past.” (blunt 5/2 2001: 26)

With the rise of street, skateboarding was symbolically distanced from White and class privileged spheres, and by association with urban youth cultures turned into an activity that was attractive for boys and men from a large variety of social backgrounds (cf. Brayton 2005: 365; Schäfer 2018: 55ff.). The ties to urban street culture were both an effect of and a catalyst for the increasing race and class diversity. Not least, the sport in South Africa shifted from exclusive spaces to the public urban space. In the context of South Africa, in which the class privileged sections of the population largely shielded themselves in private and commercialised spaces after transformation, this was tantamount to a reorientation of skateboarding towards spaces accessible to the marginalised and facilitated the emergence of diverse social networks among skaters who met each other in urban public space. The easier availability and sinking costs of equipment further nurtured the opening of the sport, especially with the relaxation of international trade sanctions after 1994 (cf. Bond 2000: 49). However, compared to mainstream sports, such as soccer and rugby, skateboarding was still a rather costly activity (Masterson 2008a: 86).

The increasing social diversity in skateboarding was accompanied by debates in the scene which occasionally became visible in the media. Blunt, the only regular South African skateboarding publication of the late 1990s and early 2000s, provided interesting insights into issues and questions raised in South African skateboarding after the transformation to democracy. The general moral, ethical and political pressures that White South Africans faced post-transformation due to perpetuated inequalities after apartheid, especially regarding access to land, economic opportunities and other existential resources (Bond 2004: 47), seemed to also affect the White editorial staff of the magazine. Under the headline “white guilt” the editor-in-chief addressed the historically grown White hegemony in and still White connotation of skateboarding in 2001:

“This issue’s Lunch [sic] is about something that most of us can relate to, and that’s South African White Guilt. Fact: Most of the readers of this magazine are whiteys. A bunch of palefaced people of Anglo-saxon/Caucasian/Judaic/Eastern European extraction, with largely Eurocentric tendencies. That’s simply the nature of the activities we cover, which mostly have their modern origins in Europe or USA.” (blunt 5/2 2001: 6)

The author argued that since the transformation White South Africans had been sweepingly burdened with the guilt of the past. But younger generations, of which he considered himself a part of, were not to blame for the fact that they had profited from the historical oppression and exploitation of South Africa's majority (blunt 5/2 2001: 6). Contributions such as these suggested that White skaters were confronted with the burden of the apartheid legacy, and with questions regarding the legitimacy of White privilege and hegemony reproduced within the subculture, when an increasing number of South Africans of colour entered the world of skateboarding. The editor pleaded for moral relief in reference to his hard work downplaying the relevance of intergenerationally transmitted inequalities:

“I may have benefited from a superior education because I'm white, but I have worked my butt off – working a variety of jobs overseas as menial as digging holes as a labourer, or macking meat slices into polystyrene trays for 12 hours a day – to get where I am. Everyday I see the ravages of apartheid. Crime, rape, poverty. Some people still hate Blacks and Coloureds because of the gangsters. But what about their own people, who suffer from them the most? Or white corporate criminals who defraud us and rob our country of millions? [...] I'm going to stop feeling guilty, give the odd beggar a dime, try to be nice to everybody and hope that I don't get robbed, mugged, murdered, my female acquaintances [...] don't get raped. [...] And if you don't like what I am saying, maybe you should get on a plane and piss off. We don't need you here.” (blunt 5/2 2001: 6)

As Kamanga (2019: 16) and Mbembe (2008: 9) had argued, many South African Whites were seeking to morally and ethically absolve themselves in the mirror of historically grown inequalities and perpetuated injustices after 1994. In a similar manner, blunt's editorial staff, claiming to speak for a larger part of the (White) skateboarding scene, self-admittedly discharged accusations of having profited from the apartheid past. No authors of colour seemed to contribute content throughout, hinting at the hegemony of Whites in the skateboarding industry, especially when taking controversial statements like the above cited into account. At least, the magazine attempted to integrate the voices of Black, Coloured and Indian skateboarders through articles, interviews and readers' letters, aiming to involve athletes from class and race marginalised backgrounds. This was first the case in 1998, when the skateboarders Kevin Naidoo and Cheslin Paradayachi were interviewed in the magazine. Naidoo was introduced as “a rare breed: a Kwa-Zulu Natal Indian who is a good skateboarder”, having started the sport in Richard's Bay in 1992 (blunt 5/2 1998: 31). Naidoo addressed his experiences with racism in skateboarding and pointed out that the sport was being viewed sceptically in the Indian community. Paradayachi, a Coloured skater from Heathfield,

Cape Town, recounted how the local skateboarding legend Errol Strachan had inspired him to pick up skateboarding in 1990. At the end of the interview Paradayachi was asked “Are you the swaart gevaar of skateboarding?”, simultaneously a tongue-in-cheek reference to ‘swaart gevaar’-trope of the apartheid-days, as well as a display of the vulgar humour present in the magazine that involved latent racism at times (ibid. 32). In the following issue of *blunt*, a self-identified Indian skateboarder praised the editors for the portrayal of Naidoo in a letter, as this was the first other Indian skateboarder the letter’s author had seen. Such examples demonstrated that skateboarders who had previously been left out of media discourse were now increasingly included and made visible, nurturing a changing public perception of skateboarding as a race and class diverse youth culture and sport, and providing role models for a developing diverse skateboarding scene.

In later issues of *blunt*, it became clear that the social diversification of skateboarding was gaining pace in the 2000s. In an article titled “Children of the Kerb: South Africa’s skateboarding youth”, a number of young skaters had been interviewed, among them self-identified White, Coloured and Black skateboarders. Lucky Ngubane and Whandile Zulu stated being sponsored by several local companies (*blunt* 6/3 2002: 42-51), and exemplarily represented the increasing diversity that was now also touching professional skateboarding. In the following year, *blunt* announced on the cover: “Whandile Zulu: SA’s first black pro” (*blunt* 7/4 2003). The then 19-years-old Zulu had ‘turned pro’ by receiving a signature skateboard deck by the local company Viking. Even if not represented in the magazine, Arnold Gray and Mark Simpson joined Zulu as the first pro skaters of colour being honoured with their own signature decks. Almost a decade after the end of apartheid, the time had come when White hegemony had been breached and Black, Coloured and Indian skaters were being recognised as professional athletes. Yet, with the diversification of the sport’s demography, divisions were now also becoming visible within it. Zulu explained his observations of (perpetuated) racialised divisions in skateboarding, but also the shift towards an integrated skateboarding scene:

“Before I moved to Cape Town from Boksburg, I experienced a lot of racial tension because I’m a black skater. Nowadays it’s pretty rare and things are changing. For example on my recent trip there, I was stoked to see black skaters in Pretoria, but there is still separation, like we went to a restaurant in different cars and it would always be the black guys skating together and the white guys skating together. It’s different with the younger generation though, and even the parents are becoming more open-minded.” (*blunt* 7/4 2003: 34)

Zulu's statement mirrored the experiences that some older skateboarders shared with me. Especially in the 2000s, there seemed to have been a significant popularisation of the sport among once marginalised sections of the population, facilitated by the general acceptance of skateboarding in the social 'mainstream', the higher presence of skateboarding in mainstream media, the easier availability of skateboarding equipment and better access to skateboarding infrastructure. The race and class diversity of the sport increased noticeably, race and class related inequalities were increasingly addressed and the achievements of ambitious skaters of colour were more and more recognised in the commercial sphere. Publications like *blunt* contributed to a debate on these social issues and illustrated the changes that were taking place. They also showcased new role models for a new, diverse generation of skateboarders. At the same time, they made it visible that the change of social relations in skateboarding did not come without conflicts.

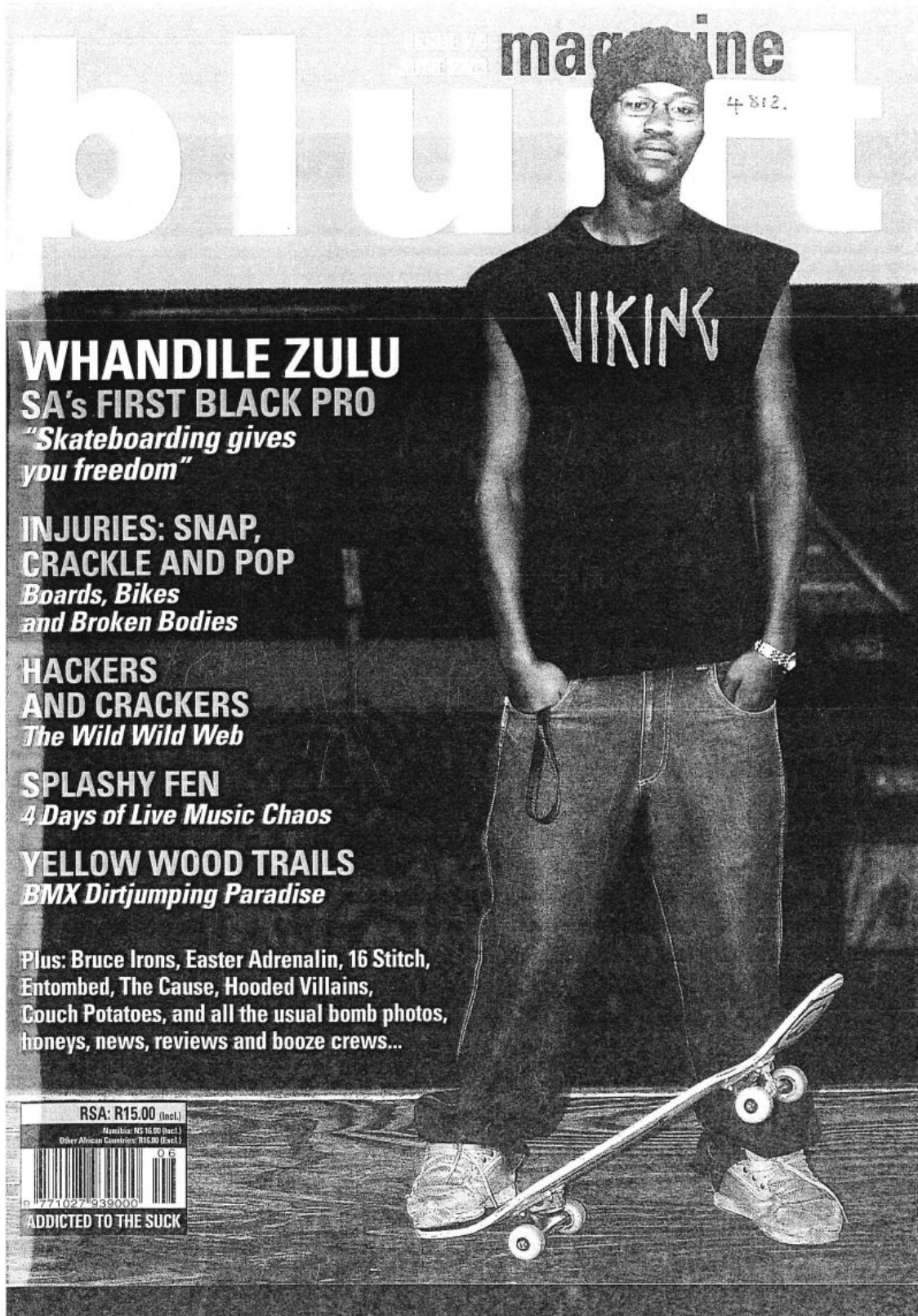


Illustration 4: On the cover of the action sports magazine *blunt*, Whandile Zulu is proclaimed the first Black professional skateboarder in South Africa (*blunt* 7/4 2003).

An aspect that was brought onto the agenda with the diversification of the sport was the connotation of skateboarding with whiteness. As illuminated earlier in the thesis, skateboarding in South Africa had long been a White dominated sport and was thus widely perceived as a 'White activity'. After 1994, the White connotation of the sport was slowly fading. A similar development was to be witnessed in American and European skateboarding a few years earlier (Williams 2020: 243f.). Yet, this process took time, and still in the 2000s skaters of colour had to deal with occasional hostility and ridiculing. Keagan, Michael and Samuel, members of a skateboarding crew from Cape Town, explained to me how dedicating themselves to skateboarding in the 2000s caused at times ridicule and resentment in their neighbourhoods that had been classified Coloured under apartheid. Investing themselves into an activity associated with the White middle class when living in a Coloured working class neighbourhood was taken as an affront by some residents (cf. Noah 2016: 118). Dedicating themselves to skateboarding could even render the skaters targets for petty criminals and gang members, as the sport was associated with affluence:

Keagan: Us skateboarding in the 2000s as like teenagers which was known as a White predominantly sport made us associated with the White man which was then seen as a weakness in our own community. So we were kind of, if we didn't belong to a gang we were, of course, weaker than any individual within a gang and therefore targeted, 'cause they could rob us easily, but because we weren't in a gang and we were skateboarders which was affiliated to the White man we were further seen as easy targets to approach and, you know, take advantage of.

Michael: Yeah, we were like Whites, basically when we were growing up in the Cape Flats skateboarding, like 16, 17, we were like the White kids of the Cape Flats, you know what I mean? We still Coloured, but to the other kids, growing up around us, 'cause we could afford to skate, with the little that we had we could afford, we had skateboards, you know.

Samuel: I always like hated skateboarding when I was growing up, 'cause yeah I was living in a fucking Coloured community, you know. In there, my bru, was like, you can't do something that is considered White. But I never like thought that I would ever skateboard, I was like ach fuck skateboarding. [...] I started rollerblading. Because I wanted to do extreme sports, and I saw the rollerbladers that day, and also that, wow, like ice-skating, that's cool. So that's were I started doing that in the streets, it's funny enough that all I went to do that, because from rollerblading it would be breakdancing, then through breakdancing I met a guy that basically got me into skateboarding.

Around the year 2007 in north-eastern Kwa-Zulu Natal, professional skateboarder Khule Ngubane had to deal with similarly negative reactions from his environment when engaging in the sport. His

social surrounding refused to support his passion, which was depreciated as a ‘White activity’ in a Black neighbourhood near Durban⁵⁹:

“Interviewer: How long ago did you get into skateboarding and what grew your passion for the sport?”

Khule Ngubane: Almost 8 years ago, my grandpa asked me what I wanted for my birthday and I had told him a skateboard because I had seen it on TV and I was fascinated by them. The freedom aspect and living in the ‘now’ in any sport looked amazing and I was determined to be a part of that. What grew my passion really was love, being different and misunderstood. Imagine being a young township black kid, growing up and being exposed to a ‘white like’ sport. Being different, cause I don’t like to dress like them or become a soccer player like they believed. Also your family not supporting you because they’re not used to kids wanting the lifestyle of shoes and boards every month or two. Skaters also have a ‘rebel like’ stereotype about them, ‘cause they might drink and smoke in front of people. For your teenage son that environment isn’t the best and my family wanted me to stop skating which was the hardest of times for me cause I had no physical or emotional support structure from anybody really.”⁶⁰

Unlike White skateboarders of the time, who might have faced rejection and belittlement by a conservative social surrounding for dedicating themselves to an activity associated with deviance and rebelliousness, but who had a ‘conceivable place’ within the racialised society, skateboarders of colour had to defend themselves, in addition, against hostilities arising from the transgression of racialised structures and norms. Negative reactions could have a discouraging effect and raise doubts whether this sport is ‘for them’ at all. Consequently, especially during and shortly after the transformation, emerging role models were of importance for skaters of colour to boost their confidence in a potentially intimidating social surrounding. It was skateboarders like Ayusch who emphasised the importance that role models could have in a transforming society. For him, who had picked up skateboarding around 1990, it was the Black skateboarder Steve Dlamini from Eswatini (Swaziland) who was a living proof that also he, as an Indian South African, could occupy a legitimate place in skateboarding:

Ayusch: A friend of mine told me that there is a kid from Swaziland staying at the back of my place, and he also skates. So that happened to be Steve [Dlamini]. So Steve used

59 Luthuli, Lusanda (23.06.2019): Meet Durban Skateboarder, Khule Ngubane: At 25, Khule Ngubane is seen as a veteran in the Durban skateboarding scene, but on a global scale, he is at his peak, Highway Mali, online-source: <https://highwaymail.co.za/324388/meet-durban-skateboarder-khule-ngubane> [accessed: 01.07.2020].

60 LW Mag (n.d.): The Skate Life of Khule Ngubane, LW Mag, online-source: <https://lwmag.co.za/the-skate-life-of-khule-ngubane> [accessed: 01.07.2020].

to, we used to ride into him in town, because we were from here, Mayfair, Fordsburg, then he used, he was visiting like some course, I don't know what he was studying, but he used to come right there to Fordsburg, where we used to live. So when we used to go to market lane, that square, sometimes we used to catch him skating there. So that ou was basically super inspiring, you know. He was like the equivalent for a Ray Barbee⁶¹ in South Africa, I'd say. Because that was like unheard of. Just this tall, yanky ou with his cons-eye tops, and you know, he was just looked like he was ahead of his time for those days, you know. 'Cause there was nobody else riding a board like, a Black ou riding a board, na. So he in a way, ya, he made it, he like opened our eyes so to say, you know, it's like you guys can also do this shit.

Interviewer: You mean because as a kid you thought it was like a White thing?

Ayusch: Ya, 'Cause, that's the thing. It was always regarded as this like laanie [well off, in this context also White] sport.

Numerous older informants recounted how being confronted with doubts, rejection and ridicule, the presence of role models played an important part in boosting their confidence. Similar accounts were to be found in the wider media discourse, like in a reader's letter in the 2002-issue of blunt:

“Hi GDf, I'm an African skater and proud of myself. People can say whatever they wanna say, it's my choice in this world. There is no such thing as African people not being able to skate, everyone is allowed to skate. There is no colour in skating, if you like skating, go for it. It is a very nice thing to do and I would like to see more African skaters. One of my favourite African skaters is Whandile Zulu. He used to live around the corner from me and the way I knew him was that he didn't care what people said about him.” (blunt 6/4 2002: 8)

Twenty years on, some Black skaters still experienced being confronted with negative reactions from multiple angles because they were practising a white-connotated sport, as the statement of a young skater from Johannesburg illustrated:

“Growing up as a young Black man that gravitated towards skateboarding and the culture it celebrates was not always easy for me to share with outsiders,” Karabo Mooki tells *It's Nice That*. “I was met with criticism from both Black and white people who believed that I was lost in my own identity, taking part in a dominantly white sport.”⁶²

61 Ray Barbee was an early Black professional street skateboarder in the US. Barbee visited South Africa in the 1990s and again in the late 2010s. He had been a role model for some South African Street Skateboarders of colour of that time. Ayusch had taken Barbee deep into his heart and managed to snap a photo arm-in-arm with his great idol in August 2019 when Barbee visited Johannesburg, more than 20 years after seeing the American skater for the first time. By comparing Steve Dlamini to Ray Barbee, Ayusch emphasised the great role model function of the Black South African skater for the local scene.

With the growing number of skaters of colour, their presence became normalised in the course of the 2000s and especially the 2010s. The general popularisation of western (urban) youth cultures, in whose sphere skateboarding had found its recognised place, further promoted the erosion of the sport's White connotation. Of greatest importance, however, was that the sport had become diverse in practical terms. In the wake of the generally more positive image of skateboarding in the recent past, rejection seemed to have been superseded by appreciation in marginalised neighbourhoods as well. This was emphasised by Michael and Keagan, whom I asked about the changing image of skateboarding in the Cape Flats:

Interviewer: And when you were saying like in the early days you were like, viewed like the guys who do this White kinda thing and you were also like a target, did this change like at one point? Is it like still like that?

Michael: It changed a bit probably with the internet access.

Keagan: That yeah.

Michael: And the growth of popular culture now. Because like America's Cape Flats or underprivileged areas caught onto the internet long before our underprivileged areas caught onto the internet. Which had an impact on a certain amount of people in these negative places, that were pushing positive identities to grow, like, you know. So ya, it's the positive side, it is seen as a very positive thing now in the Cape Flats, I'd say.

With the increasing social diversity of skateboarding and the fading of its White connotation, the presence of skaters of colour was turning more and more into a matter of course. Even though the sport still had a visible overrepresentation of White athletes and still carried some of its original White connotation in the late 2010s⁶³ and early 2020s, the majority of skateboarders in the country was, without doubt, of colour. As Johannesburg skateboarding activists Sam Khumalo and Sechaba 'The Bakersman' had pointed out in an interview in 2018, this development was quite visible, but in a country with a Black majority not necessarily remarkable:

62 Thomas, Elfie (12.05.2022): "Skateboarding feels a lot like therapy": Karabo Mooki shares stories of South Africa's all-female skate group, Island Gals [text and images], It's Nice That, online-source: <https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/karabo-mooki-island-gals-photography-120522> [accessed: 28.09.2022].

63 For example, as recently as 2014, Johannesburg skateboarder Sechaba the Bakersman from Soweto commented in an interview on the motivation behind his activism: "As long as I haven't seen every kid in Soweto on a skateboard, it feels like I haven't done anything. I want Black kids to dominate this sport because it's seen as a White sport." (Mahame, Neo (23.06.2014): Young people to watch – Sechaba TheBakersman, Live Mag, online-source: <https://livemag.co.za/young-people-watch-sechaba-thebakersman> [accessed: 26.08.2018]).

“SAM KHUMALO SKATER ‘When I started there weren't as many black skateboarders. I mean I have been skateboarding for 17 years now. Definitely now the demographic has changed from when it was predominantly known as a white sport in a sense to what it is now. Now there's more kids in the township that access skateboarding and stuff like that.’

SECHABA 'THE BAKERS MAN' SOWETO SKATE SOCIETY FUNDER ‘When I started skating there were a lot of white kids skating but I never really saw it based on race but now there are lots of black kids. Like if you go anywhere where there's a skateboarding event, there's more black kids than white kids. That's pretty cool. But then again that's not a surprise cause in South Africa the majority of people are black people so it's not much of a great deal, you know what I mean.’”⁶⁴

Skateboarding had thus shed its White connotation to a large extent, but not yet comprehensively. The sport was still in the process of approaching a demographic representation of the South African population. The fact that it had already turned into a much more race and class diverse social space since the end of apartheid contributed significantly to the changing public image of skateboarding, and made it much easier for new generations to take up the sport and find a recognised place in it. In terms of gender inequalities and male preponderance South African skateboarding did not undergo fundamental changes. Similar to developments in the USA and Europe, street skateboarding nurtured a further masculinisation of and the exclusion of girls and women from the sport (cf. Borden 2019: 38). In my historical investigation, the marginality of girls and women in skateboarding became glaringly obvious in skateboarding media where they were practically absent. One of the few exceptions was skateboarder Melissa Williams, who appeared in the skateboarding magazines *blunt* (6/7 2002: 15; 7/2 2003: 58) and *Session* (75 2016: 36), and who had made repeated appearances in more recent media. In the South African context, Williams played a similarly exceptional role as Elissa Steamer had in the US (cf. Borden 2001: 143; Porter 2003: 29). Rarely were other female skaters visible as active athletes in skateboarding media, painting the sport as a male dominated activity. When girls and women were made visible, it was not seldom in connection with misogynistic and sexist depictions, particularly in the 1990s and early 2000s. In 1999, for example, *blunt* explicitly addressed female skateboarders in an issue (*blunt* 3/2 1999). The issue exemplified that the discussion of sexism in the skate scene was in its infancy and could quickly tip over into a mocking of gender issues. This already became apparent with the issue's title “the ‘babe’ issue: boardriders of the opposite sex”, more or less objectifying and othering female

64 CGTN (29.12.2018): South African Skateboarding: Soweto Skate Society Launces, CGTN, online-source: https://news.cgtn.com/news/3045544d30494464776c6d636a4e6e62684a4856/share_p.html [accessed: 17.10.2019].

skaters, and the cover photo featuring a scantily dressed, young woman carrying a surfboard through shallow water. Moreover, included in the issue is a questionable essay with the title “the art of tuning chicks” (blunt 3/2 1999: 18), supposedly providing boys and men with strategies for successfully approaching and dating women. The essay is filled with stereotypical, sexist, and latently misogynistic content. It appears as if the magazine’s authors seemed to assume that there are no girls and women among the readers. Blunt exemplifies, how the perspectives of female skaters were not only largely excluded, but how misogyny and sexism permeated the media discourse around skateboarding. Discursively, the marginalisation of girls and women in sport was thus further reinforced.

However, sexism and misogyny in skateboarding media visibly decreased in the course of the 2010s and it barely played a role in blunt’s successor Session Magazine. Skateboarding seemed to join the generally decreasing acceptance and growing criticism of sexism in society. Increasingly, the sport was marketed to girls and women, and NGOs discovered skateboarding as a tool for the empowerment of girls and women. Female skateboarding was increasingly promoted from the 2010s onwards. Yet, the perspectives of girls and women remained largely invisible and were seldom included in ‘core’ street skateboarding media. Above all, women seemed to remain completely excluded from professional careers. When girls and women became more visible in South African skateboarding since the late 2010s, the established skateboarding media channels hardly played a role. It was largely a number of NGOs, feminist initiatives, a number of video documentaries and mainstream media reports that brought female skateboarding and gender issues on the table. Overall, the marked male dominance in skateboarding changed little over time. While the rise of street skateboarding has brought about a significant diversification of the sport in terms of race and class, in terms of gender it has tended to further masculinise it. In the following chapter, I will take a closer look at the role of gender and sexuality in skateboarding and illuminate causes of street skateboarding’s development into a masculine playground in South Africa.

4 Grinding masculinity: gender, sexism and homophobia in South African street skateboarding

In this chapter I will analytically dissect gender inequalities in South African street skateboarding which I encountered as a remarkably male dominated and masculine connoted sport and subculture. In my ethnographic fieldwork, I identified two aspects to be particularly relevant for the production of masculinity and male preponderance in street skateboarding: bodily practices and the urban public spaces in which these practices are performed. In this chapter, I will first describe skateboarders' practices in detail, to then address how they are employed for the production of masculinity. I then turn to the skateboarders' active approach to urban space, and illuminate how challenges and risks in South African urban public spaces played a central role in the production of masculine identities and male preponderance. I then look more closely at how gender related structural inequalities, homophobia and sexism contributed to a comprehensive marginalisation of girls and women, and gay boys and men in skateboarding.

4.1 The practice of street skateboarding

First and foremost, skateboarding is a bodily practice in space. Consequently, understanding the production and performance of masculinity in skateboarding requires the involvement of its physical and material aspects into the analysis. In the following I will describe the core elements of street skateboarding as a practice. This should give a basic understanding of the sport especially to readers who are not familiar with it. Based on this description I will unfold the embeddedness of the practice in societal gender relations. My argument here is based on my observations, my practical experiences, countless conversations with skateboarders (and non-skateboarders) and the study of skateboarding magazines, videos and websites. At the beginning of my fieldwork I had a rough understanding of the practical cornerstones of the sport. Yet, it was only when I practically joined the skaters that I understood the important subtleties, details and challenges that underpinned the skateboarder's fascination with the sport and the constitution of masculinity through it.

Boiled down to its practical essence, skateboarding is a balancing act on a moving board on four wheels overcoming obstacles whereby the board is manipulated in the process. In contrast to other riding and driving activities, in skateboarding the body is moved sideways instead of forward, similar to surfing and snowboarding (Friedel 2015: 46). The distinction between different styles of skateboarding depends on the type of skateboards used, the architectural spaces approached and the

manoeuvres performed. For street skateboarding athletes used a very specific tool, the street skateboard, a standardised vehicle, available in slightly different sizes, shapes and weights, with two steerable axles, four wheels and two raised tails on both ends of the board. With street skateboarding the balancing act is performed in urban public spaces involving characteristic objects and specific manoeuvres (cf. Borden 2001: 202).

Although the whole body is employed in skateboarding, for the majority of tricks it is primarily the legs and feet that are used to manipulate the board, whereas with the upper body's movements skateboarders maintain their balance. Becoming a good skateboarder therefore requires investing an enormous amount of time in developing the right feeling and muscle memory in the feet and legs to manipulate the skateboard during the ride and in the air. The sport demands a very special configuration of bodily capital (cf. Wacquant 2004: 95), building it takes years of hard training (Abulhawa 2020: 93). The true difficulty of skateboarding was often underestimated in the non-skating public. I could observe this recurrently in my field research, when interested children, teenagers or adults watched street skateboarders with interest and asked them if they could give it a try, assuming they could quickly give it a go. At times, skaters would hand their boards to the inexperienced, only to see them rowing their arms clumsily to hold balance on the stationary board, or to take some slapstick humour from their falls. Beginners usually already had major difficulties with the pure basics of the sport, which underlined the real difficulty of advanced skateboarding. What was of actual interest to street skateboarders is precisely everything but just standing on and riding a board as the attention was rather on practices that enable board and rider to get off the ground to elegantly overcome obstacles.

First, I will give a rough overview of the practices, manoeuvres and tricks that define street skateboarding. The essential manoeuvre and often not considered a trick in itself is the ollie. It allows skaters to leap themselves into the air together with the skateboard without the use of their hands. The ollie is a prerequisite for most tricks and therefore the first learning objective of every aspiring street skater (Borden 2001: 179). Once the ollie has been mastered, many more opportunities for moving through urban space open up, because many obstacles in public spaces can be easily overcome by jumping over them, such as curbs, stairs and potholes. The jump technique allows for a much smoother and more consistent ride in urban environments, it reveals the true potential of skateboarding in urban space and is the prerequisite to enter the 'cool world' of street skateboarding (Abulhawa 2020: 91). Yet, the ollie is quite hard to learn and most beginners have to invest weeks or even months of practice to master it. I could observe this in numerous skate NGOs, where children and youth were more or less successfully trying to learn how to ollie. Those kids

who succeeded usually stayed with skateboarding for some time, while those kids who failed at the ollie often didn't pursue it in the long run either. Anyone who had achieved mastery of it had certainly demonstrated a relatively high degree of intrinsic motivation and dedication. Successfully mastering the ollie could be regarded as the first, important initiation ritual in street skateboarding, as an important distinction in the skate scene was whether individuals could perform an ollie or if they could only ride a board on the ground (cf. Peters 2016: 102). Only after the ollie had been learned, from the perspective of the street skateboarders, the 'real skateboarding' started and work on the recognised tricks could begin, which opened the door for a skater to develop his or her 'own style' and develop an individual identity within the cosmos of the skateboarding world.⁶⁵



Illustration 5: Being able to ollie is certainly the most important skill of street skateboarders. Here, Corbin (right) ollied over an obstacle from a small concrete ramp while being filmed with a smartphone by a befriended skateboarder in the inner city of Johannesburg.

⁶⁵ It was not uncommon among trick skateboarders to regard people who rode skateboards but were unable to perform an ollie not as skateboarders at all. The ollie was an important marker of distinction in skateboarding.

A particularly important trick category necessitating the successful acquisition of the ollie are flip tricks, which enrich jumps by further manipulation of the board. The skateboard is pushed or dragged with the feet when the skateboarder ollies it into the air in such a way that it rotates around its horizontal and/or vertical axis under the skater's feet while jumping (Snyder 2017: 41). Flips only 'count' when the athlete manages to catch the board with his or her feet in the air, land on it and roll away. This trick type was originally developed in freestyle skateboarding, but had become a constitutive element of street style. In fact, a significant number of well-known flip tricks had been developed by the famous freestyle skateboarder Rodney Mullen who only later in his career turned towards street skateboarding (Mullen/Mortimer 2004: 222ff.). Depending on how the board is made rotate, skateboarders distinguish flips from each other. Flips are most often performed on flat ground, on transitions, and over and on obstacles. They are a very present element in street skateboarding and the mastery of many flips and variations effectively proves the experience of a skateboarder.

Slides and grinds are tricks performed on and over objects after jumping on them. Thereby, a board does not roll with the wheels over an obstacle, but it is skidded over an obstacle. If the wooden skateboard deck touches the object, this is called a slide, if the metal trucks touch the obstacle, this is called a grind. Depending on the position and orientation of the board on the obstacle, a distinction is made between different types of slides and grinds (Abulhawa 2020: 92; Snyder 2017: 43). Typically, these tricks are practised on the edges of objects, such as curbs, walls, stair steps and on (hand)railings. Since they usually have to be initiated and completed with an ollie, they are often combined with flip tricks by advanced skateboarders when jumping on or off the obstacles.

Under the term aerials skaters understand a variety of tricks performed during airtime after a jump, sometimes involving the usage of hands to manipulate the board while in the air. Aerials have achieved high popularity in vert skateboarding, particularly so-called grabs, where the high jumps give athletes much time to manipulate the board. Aerial tricks are less important in street skateboarding, because jump heights are generally lower and the airtime is rather short compared to vert. Another important trick category that is more at home in vert skateboarding and seldom used in street skating are lip tricks. With these, the upper edge of a ramp or any other object that can be ridden up to is used to perform various movements, from 'hooking' the board to the edge, to handstands and other acrobatic feats. Many lip tricks are on the border of slides and grinds, for example the so-called rock and roll where the board is brought diagonally over the edge and then pulled back into the ramp again.

Manuals are among the few popular recognised tricks that do not necessarily require initiation through jumping/ollieing. They consist of balancing the board while riding on only one axle over a longer distance. Skilled skaters can perform a manual even on one wheel. Advanced street skaters can initiate manuals immediately when landing which renders them an important trick to ‘bridge’ tricks performed in lines. Furthermore, there are manoeuvres and tricks that do not fit into the categories described above. I just name a few to give an idea about the manifold trick opportunities in street skateboarding. With wallrides skaters jump against or ride up a wall, practically riding the skateboard vertically for a brief moment. So-called ‘hippie jumps’ boil down to riders jumping over an obstacle without the board, with the skateboard passing the obstacle rolling underneath, to then land on the board again after the obstacle. In this way, for example, railings or shopping carts can be elegantly overcome. Pole jams are tricks bound to a very particular object in public space, namely bent poles that skateboarders ride up and over, usually grinding or sliding the object in the process. Sliding is furthermore used as a term to describe the sideways-sliding (or drifting) of a skateboard rolling on the ground, usually at higher speeds and on downhill. Slides on the ground do not only look cool, they are intentionally used by advanced skateboarders to reduce speed. They are not necessarily recognised as tricks in the strict sense, but as they require excellent balance and board control, they underline the experience of a rider.

The complexity of skateboarding’s trick cosmos is further increased by trick variations and modifications that skaters use to enrich their performances and increase the difficulty of particular tricks. For non-skateboarders, the large number of recognised tricks is often already difficult to grasp and to distinguish. Variations and modifications make things even more complicated.

The most important aspects that are regarded as modifying a trick are the position of the feet on the board (the stance), the direction of travel and rotations of the body (Snyder 2017: 40). Every skater rides in a habituated position of the feet, with one foot in the front and the other foot in the back. If the left foot is in front, skaters speak of ‘regular’ stance, if the right foot is in front, skaters speak of ‘goofy’. If a skater rides a board with a switched position of the front- and the back foot, this is called ‘switch’ (ibid. 43). A trick performed as switch corresponds to an increased difficulty, because the skater has to partially re-learn already mastered movement sequences of the feet, similar to re-learning motions with the left hand as a right-hander. If a skater is able to perform tricks ‘switch’ this strongly underlines an advanced skill level. Tricks performed ‘switch’ are not to be confused with tricks performed ‘fakie’, where a skater rolls backwards in regular stance and perform tricks.⁶⁶

66 Even though street skateboards look symmetrical for the uninitiated, the nose of a board is slightly longer and steeper than the tail. A skateboard has accordingly an intended direction of travel.

Rotations of the body constitute another important modification that is combinable with almost all tricks. Rotations are distinguished into front- and backside. With frontside rotations a skater turns his or her front towards the direction of travel or the object the trick is performed on or over. It is the opposite with backside rotations. Skaters can thus enrich a kickflip with a 180 or 360 degree frontside or backside rotation of the body, and giving this trick a higher value in the scenic trick hierarchy by increasing its aesthetic appeal and the difficulty of exertion (Snyder 2017: 43). In certain situations, tricks performed with the back to the obstacle (backside) are more challenging and require more courage than when skaters turn towards the obstacle (frontside).⁶⁷

67 For example, a boardslide on a handrail leading down a steep stair set seems much more risky when performed backside as the skater jumps on and slides down the railing with the body facing backwards (with the skateboard being placed sideways on the rail). Such a move requires advanced skills, high precision and courage. In the case of a fall, the likelihood of the athlete being unable to control and dampen his fall is higher compared to the same trick performed frontside, where the skater faces the direction of travel.

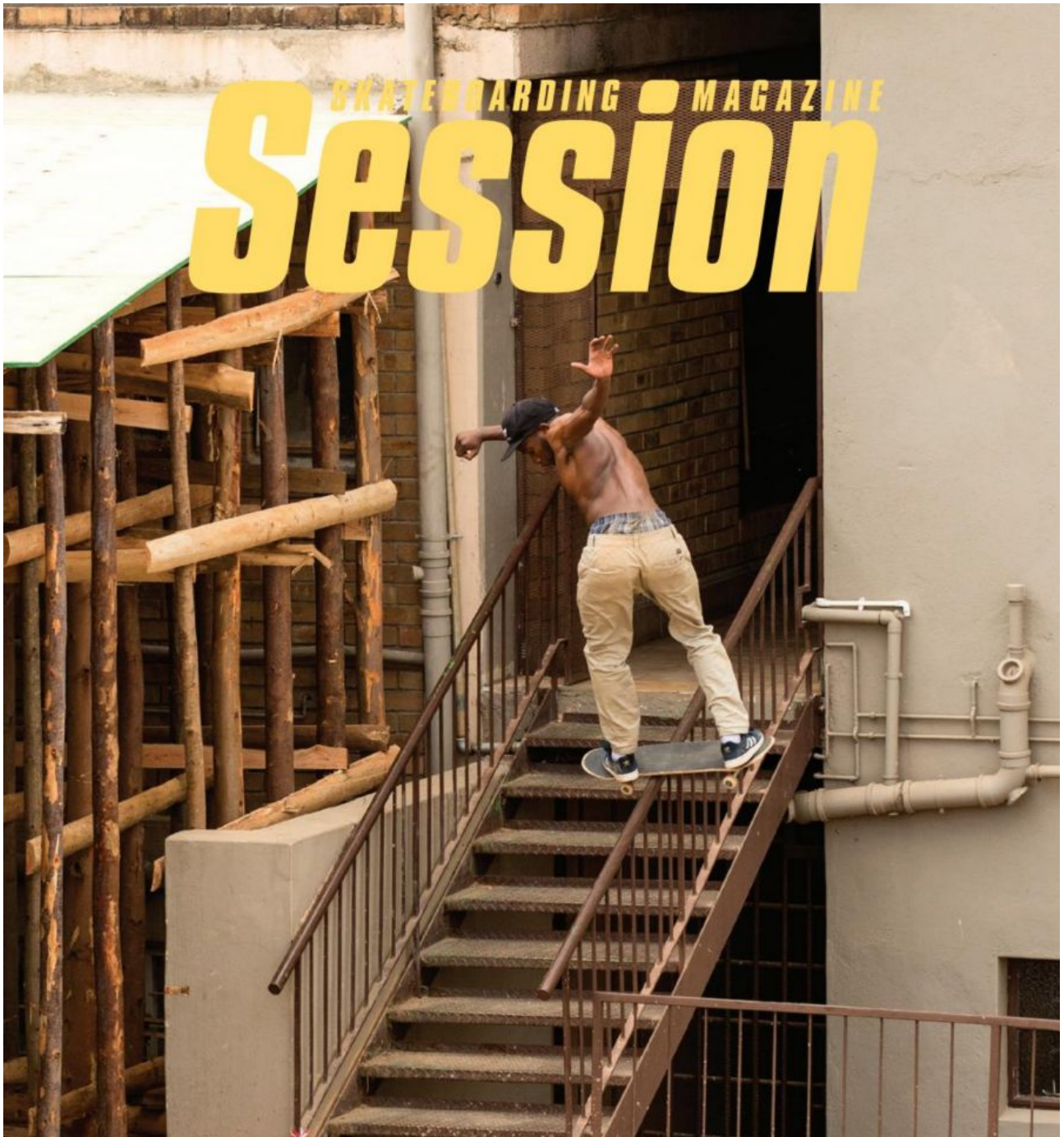


Illustration 6: The cover of a 2016-issue of Session Skateboarding Magazine is depicting Joshua Crisholm performing a backside boardslide on a handrail, a difficult trick performed at a challenging, dangerous spot proving the advanced skill level and daredevil attitude of the skater (source: Session 74 2016).

In skateboarding culture, a complex terminology has developed describing tricks and reflecting the vast possibilities on the board (cf. Snyder 2017: 42).⁶⁸ This terminology facilitates the verbal exchange about certain movements and allows skateboarders to extrapolate a movement sequence from a photograph's description, which was particularly relevant to describe motion sequences when the media discourse on skateboarding was mainly carried out through photos in magazines. The naming conventions take into account the variations and modifications that go into different tricks, and finely distinguish between various types of tricks.⁶⁹ As Snyder argued,

“[s]kateboarding is a subculture of spatial manipulation and visual documentation, but it is also linguistically precise, like musical notation. The description of the trick and the spot reveals exactly what was performed” (Snyder 2017: 47).

Apart from learning a large number of different tricks, variations and modifications, the ‘supreme discipline’ in street skateboarding is to string together as many tricks as possible performing them directly one after the other in ‘lines’. With the flawless combination of several tricks in a line, a skateboarder particularly proves his or her skills (cf. Borden 2001: 93). An exemplary, typical trick combination would be that a skater performs a flip trick when jumping on a ledge, enters directly into a boardslide on it and ollies off the ledge performing another flip trick before landing. These would be three separate tricks (flip, slide, flip), but combined into one trick combination (line). The more tricks a skater can chain together, the more recognition is generated as tricks performed flawlessly in a row bear witness to the honed skills of an athlete (especially if performed looking effortless). In terms of photo and video production, lines also enable the depiction of longer, coherent sequences, counteracting the tendency towards fragmentation of videos through short single-trick-clips, and generate a more pleasant and ‘flowy’ effect of the material (Peters 2016: 190). In a way, it is the unattainable dream of every skater to perform an unlimited number of tricks without mistakes and thus without interruptions one after the other while riding through the city, providing continuous joy devoid of frustration and pain resulting from losses of control and falls.

68 In street skateboarding a complex language has developed with which tricks are described and labelled. Through the interplay of tricks and modifiers, the resulting terminology for manoeuvres is sometimes difficult for non-skateboarders to understand. Without being able to provide in-depth explanations here, I recommend the reader to consult the countless publications and websites explaining skateboarding-terminology.

69 Differences between tricks can be easily overlooked by outsiders. For example, I recurrently witnessed non-skateboarders and beginners having trouble distinguishing a kickflip from a heelflip. The defining criteria for the distinction is the movement of the feet and the direction of the longitudinal rotation of the skateboard in the air. On a superficial level, both tricks look similar, but they require a different movement of the feet and legs. Due to a lack of practical experience, the latter often remained hidden to non-skaters and beginners who could therefore not distinguish both tricks from each other.

Characteristic of the skateboarding discourse seemed to be the emphasis of a creativity resulting from the interplay of tricks, variations and obstacles, and their chaining together into lines. The resulting variety was valued by skateboarders as potential for creative self-expression (cf. Mullen/Mortimer 2004: 218; Schäfer 2018: 60f.). Many skaters I met emphasised their fascination with the seemingly endless possibilities of street skateboarding, like Ayusch:

Ayusch: [The skateboard is] a street surfboard. And the thing is a surfboard you can only use on a wave, dawg. But like, when it comes to like, like spaces in the street, concrete surfaces, tarred surfaces, corners, edges, whatever, angles, there is so much more places you can take a board to, a skateboard to, than you can a surfboard to. And also, the tricks are just like almost fucking multiplied like, because a board you can tailslide, you can noseslide, you can boardslide, you can lipslide it, you can still, that's just the slides on the board itself. You can still grind the trucks, you can still flip a board, you know what I am saying. It's like limitless. You can manni [manual] a board, nosemanni, normal manni, and then, so like I said, the dimensions that they opened up, it was too great. Like there is more possible on a skateboard than on any kind of surfboard, or even roller skates. Guaranteed. It's the original hybrid, like you know. Like I don't even think, nobody knew what they were succeeded in making, 'cause even when you watch a video now. You watch some guys skating and you are like what is he even doing. 'Cause you have seen some of those clips, and you are like, what is that? Because it's not how I saw skating and how I skate. Some guys are like riding their board like, you don't even, how do you even make sense of, how did you think of even trying that? Like when I picked up a board I never thought of doing what that guy is doing, so I mean the possibilities on a board are really like something else.

Because of the countless possibilities to manipulate the board, combine tricks with each other, and engage different obstacles in urban spaces on it, there is indeed always something to learn or improve even for experienced skaters. As Snyder aptly put it, street skateboarding opens up a creative perspective on urban spaces “in which the banal and the everyday (stairs, handrails) become sites of groundbreaking achievement” (Snyder 2017: 22). And this perceived vast space of possibilities is where street skateboarding's distinction from other styles is rooted.

Moreover, it is not only the sheer execution of recognised tricks, but also ‘style’ that determines the ‘value’ of performed tricks in the world of street skateboarding. Similar to other sports and performance arts, like gymnastics, football, surfing and dancing, the aesthetic effect of the performance is given great attention, as Abulhawa had fittingly put it:

“Skateboarding physical culture hinges around a skateboarder's development of a trick repertoire, creative expression in their choice of tricks and the ways in which they perform/present them. Central to this is the skateboarder's bodied identity, their choice

of presentation of self, and the framing through which they present their practice.”
(Abulhawa 2020: 62)

The practical expression of style is complex and quite subtle. Even though individual self-expression and freedom are celebrated in skateboarding culture, there are relatively clear style norms that are recognised among skaters globally and that skateboarders seek to conform to. During my fieldwork, this was particularly noticeable with beginners, who were mainly occupied with imitating movement sequences they learned from other skateboarders and from watching (tutorial) videos. However, the standardised practices are individualised by adding style. Fundamental to skateboarding ‘in style’ is the bodily posture and the aesthetic effect of a skater’s movements. A well-developed sense of balance enables a safe and relaxed posture on the skateboard, highly appreciated among skaters (cf. Burmester/Neuber 2015: 213f.; Peters 2016: 188). Loss of control and falling are pretty much the anti-thesis to having style as it can make one look foolish and weak instead of cool, skilled, strong and in control. Appreciated style in skateboarding mainly boils down to a laid back, controlled way of riding the skateboard and performing tricks which requires deep familiarity with the device (cf. Abulhawa 2020: 70; Peters 2016: 188). Beginners are easily recognised by their lack of ‘style’ and rather ‘stiff’ performance, a result of a lack of experience and skill. In a sense, style in skateboarding is fundamentally built on making very difficult performances look easy or even effortless. The defining aspect of a valued style is the exhibited control of a device that is very hard to control: The more easily and casually this is done, the more prestige and recognition an athlete’s performance gains in the scene.

Dedicated street and trick skateboarders I met had often developed quite concrete opinions about how certain tricks should look and be performed ‘in style’. Similar to gymnastics or ice skating, for example, where the finest details of movement sequences are evaluated with great seriousness, the skateboarders judged the movement sequences of other skaters and themselves. During skate sessions at spots and in parks this happened casually. It happened explicitly when skaters watched and commented videos, and in competitions in which a jury, usually formed by experienced skateboarders, rated the runs of athletes regarding the tricks performed and stylistic effect. When skaters filmed videos of their trick performances, it was not uncommon for the athletes to watch the captured footage on the spot and repeat manoeuvres if they were unhappy with the stylistic outcome, even if the performed manoeuvres were ‘formally’ successful. At a house party of a street skater in Cape Town I got to know a very avid observer of skateboarding tricks who was introduced to me as an expert for skate videos. I would like to quote from a recording in my field research

diary, as the conversation with the skateboarding enthusiast was revealing regarding the norms and ideals defining the value of trick performances in street skateboarding culture:

At a small party at Samuel's house in Pinelands (Cape Town) I was introduced to a young man who was jokingly called the 'skate gourmet'. The gourmet was very pleased to hear about my research on skateboarding and we got into a longer conversation that evening. He had skateboarded himself for some time, but then gave up the sport and only watched videos since then. He looked quite unathletic, a bit chubby, definitely not like an active skateboarder. But nobody, the gourmet proclaimed confidently, could identify, name and judge tricks in videos more precisely than he could. To proof his deep knowledge about skate tricks, he took his smartphone out and showed me a few of his favourite skate clips. He explained which tricks were performed, what was remarkable about each performance and what he valued about the riding style of certain professional skateboarders. He appreciated it when flips were performed with high precision and the skaters caught the board in the air as if magnets were hidden in their shoes. Tight landings left him with pleasant goose bumps when all four wheels hit the ground simultaneously and perfectly aligned in the direction of travel. Acoustically, perfect landings could be recognised by the fact that there would be a short, crisp 'clack'-sound when the board touched down resulting from the simultaneous impact of the four hard wheels, he explained. Beyond single tricks, he was impressed by skateboarders who were able to ride with high consistency, and could perform long lines and difficult tricks at first go as if they were nothing. He considered it a particularly commendable achievement when skaters could perform tricks with the same quality in regular and switch. Only a very small elite of skaters was capable of this, he told me. With audible awe, he remarked: "As if a footballer has exactly the same skill with his left and right foot".

The 'gourmet's' statements exemplify the generally accurate perception and evaluation of manoeuvres common among dedicated skateboarders. Similar to the observers of gymnastics competitions, they not only pay attention to the execution of certain tricks, but also to the way they are performed. This is mirrored in the commercial photo and video culture in which 'clean' executions of tricks and manoeuvres are celebrated. Medially, the style norms are thus also continuously communicated to skateboarders who can measure their own skills and style against those of professional skaters. Yet, in a wider sense, style is understood as evolving through the interplay of a skateboarder's riding style and the self-presentation through general habitus, clothing and (sub)cultural affiliations as Samuel emphasised (cf. Abulhawa 2020: 95):

Samuel: So yeah, it's more, artistry, ya skateboarding is an art. Because the way you do know skateboarders by style, that certain skateboarders give off certain styles, and it's like how does this guy fucking skate like this? How does he do that kickflip? Everyone kickflips, but look at his kickflips! [laughing] Toeflips, tre flips, like there is a certain

thing about his tre flips that he does, it's a certain thing, not everyone can do. [...] You sort of distinguish people by their styles, you know. And that's like a, also like represents your hood where you come from. Like, your neighbourhood where you come from, the way you skate, you know, Ya, it's weird, so. It's cool man, to have like this artistry sense to it. Then you get the who are gangster kids, they wear the tight pants and the fucking, they also bring flavour to the table. So you know he does wallrides, he will just do wallies, you know that, and he does a wallie, and you are like, woah. [laughing] That's some good shit, you know. Do that polejam shit, or with other weird kak. The laities from the ghetto are doing them. It's nice so you can do your style.

So style is not developed purely through an individual's performance on the board, but is also determined by an individual's appearance, identity, habitus and social standing, in other words, by the social position of a skateboarder. Furthermore, the architectural and infrastructural conditions of one's residential area are particularly relevant for skateboarders, as they influence which skateboarding styles and skills they can develop in their immediate surrounding.

Regardless of stylistic and skill differences, skateboarding is physically very demanding, it requires both endurance, strength, high concentration and precise movements of the whole body. Acquiring the basic skills takes months of practice. Perfecting one's skills, learning a larger number of tricks and developing a fluid style usually takes many years of regular exercise. The advanced and professional skateboarders I met had often dedicated themselves to the sport since their youth or childhood, and had stuck to it up into their adulthood, spending a significant amount of lifetime to hone their skills on the board. The sport demands no less dedication and self-discipline from athletes than other competitive sports. The lifestyle of ambitious skateboarders could resemble that of high-performance athletes in that large parts of their daily lives revolved around the sport, but in an often informal and self-determined way (cf. Peters 2016: 147). The motivation of dedicated skateboarders to learn and perform certain manoeuvres occasionally struck me. Particularly when skateboarders asked me if I could film their trick attempts,⁷⁰ I was able to witness from close up the deep motivation with which skaters faced self-imposed challenges, which, depending on the difficulty of a trick or line, could last a few minutes, but also an hour or more. Rarely did trick attempts succeed first try. Each attempt told a little story, often involving initial euphoria, cautious and thoughtful approach, painful falls, frustration and doubt about one's own abilities to final success or surrender. One scene in Johannesburg I remember particularly well was when the

70 In my fieldwork I often ended up in the role of the videographer, as I had only limited skills myself, but could also be very helpful in filming through my experience with photography and my study of skate videos, through which I had developed quite a good feeling for the desired aesthetics. Since I had a quite good phone, I could also offer skaters good quality recordings.

talented skater Trae Rice fought doggedly on a trick attempt for about an hour, but did not give up until he had mastered it:

During a weekend skate session at LBGs, up-and-coming skater Trae Rice had come to film with a couple friends. At the 'Monument', a statue standing on a stone platform commemorating fallen soldiers from World War I, Rice slid over the full length of the monument's ledge and then flipped the board out. For the trick Rice had to take a long approach, sprint with the board in his hand to pick up speed, jump on it and ride towards the obstacle, and immediately perform the manoeuvre. It was a difficult trick combination, but worthy of being captured on film for that very reason. Anyway, Rice was trying to pull this trick off for almost an hour. But in every attempt something went wrong and he lost control. A few times he was about to land the trick, but still fell, commented by 'uhs' and 'ohs' of other street skateboarders and bystanders more or less attentively observing his tries. Some of the onlookers had already moved on because it took so long. After some time he looked visibly exhausted, his clothes dirty from numerous falls, but ambition had taken hold of him and after each failed attempt he took his board and rolled straight back to the starting point to try again immediately. Every now and then Rice would get vocally angry, or throw his board violently on the ground. The whole attempt seemed at times to be no longer fun, but a martyrdom that the skater was going through. After a long struggle with the obstacle, he finally succeeded in pulling the trick off, which was of course celebrated accordingly by everyone present. Rice had both exhaustion and relief written all over his face. The trick was finally done and on film. In the edited video that was publicly released a few months later the sequence occupied only a few seconds of time. The countless failed attempts were not made visible.

In the mirror of the difficulty of the self-imposed challenges, a deep satisfaction and feeling of euphoria was often striking the skaters when successful. Precisely because the activity is challenging and unforgiving, success tends to create a powerful moment of satisfaction and accomplishment for practitioners feeding intrinsic motivation, as Khanyisile explained, for example:

Khanyisile: It is like you try it and then you get it, and you are like 'oh my gosh, did you see that?!', you want the world to see it and you are like 'I am a child again'. And it's a continuous development of, not because you want to just keep doing, it is this feeling of achieving a trick. And once you know out it is not like you gonna always do it, no, it's just the human in us, we constantly want to develop and develop and develop.

But the road to advanced skateboarding is certainly long, and potentially frustrating and painful. Few have the long-term motivation and dedication to go that far. Those who stay with it long enough simply prove through demonstrating their advanced skills that they have not shied away

from the arduous path. Dealing with pain and injury, and overcoming fear play important roles in this process, and I will now take a closer look at these aspects in skateboarding.

4.2 Sacrificing the body for a manly art

The instrumentalisation of the body is of central importance for the production of masculinity in skateboarding. What is notable about skateboarding is its reputation for being a particularly injury-prone sport. It is often associated with higher physical risks for practitioners and their environment. This public image has a longer history. In the ‘Mecca’ of modern-day skateboarding, the United States of America, the sport has been banned from public spaces in some cities since the mid 1960s as it was regarded as a safety problem (Yochim 2007: 67). The injury risks ascribed to skateboarding contributed to the decline of commercial U.S. skateparks in the late 1970s (Yochim 2007: 91). These developments were partly caused by the exaggerated portrayal of the sport’s risks in public discourse. Yet, this image of skateboarding was not completely pulled out of thin air. Even some athletes, companies and skateboarding magazines of the time emphasised the physical risks involved, and the courage and bravado required to engage in the sport.

Decades later, skateboarding still oscillates between being perceived as child’s play, a laid-back recreational activity and an ‘extreme sport’. Skateboards have become an ordinary item in the assortment of many sports shops and supermarkets, and the often larger number of children riding in private and public skateparks does not seem to indicate a breakneck activity. Yet, the sport is also practised by young men in an extraordinarily dangerous way. And it is precisely these risky, extreme approaches towards the sport that are occasionally brought into the limelight and shape the popular image of skateboarding. Even in South Africa, the association of skateboarding with physical dangers for practitioners and their surrounding had led to regulations imposed by city governments. In Cape Town, skateboarding was factually banned from public spaces through a bylaw introduced in 2007⁷¹ that was still in place when I conducted fieldwork in 2016 and 2017. From the point of view of many skaters, such bans were over the top. To counter the public image of skateboarding as a potentially dangerous activity, some skateboarders and companies aimed to correct the image of the sport through activism and information campaigns. Often, skateboarding’s riskiness was

71 Openbylaws.org.za (28.09.2007): Streets, Public Places and the Prevention of Noise Nuisances [document], Openbylaws.org.za, online-source: <https://openbylaws.org.za/za-cpt/act/by-law/2007/streets-public-places-noise-nuisances/eng/> [accessed: 24.06.2020].

compared to those in other sports⁷². Exemplary, in this regard, was the statement on the website SkateboardersHQ:

“Skateboarding isn’t any more dangerous than other sports according to scientific studies, but just like any other sport, there is the risk of injury. Wear protective gear and start slow, stick with the basics when you start out and consider getting some lessons. [...] Of course, you can’t force everything, random events happen, pebbles will find you and cause a dead stop and weather conditions to influence the odds. This may sound dramatic but 90% of the time you fall and get back up, just a little scratch. It’s all part of the game.”⁷³

During my research phase it seemed that the sport continuously oscillated between the image of being a sport like any other and the image of being a neck-breaking affair. Based on my observations, my own skating practice and interviews with skateboarders, I aimed to obtain a sound picture of the specific risks of the sport and understand its physical character. As an experienced footballer, cyclist, runner and ultimate frisbee player I was able to practically compare the injury risks of skateboarding to a number of other sports.⁷⁴ From the beginning of my research project, I realised that a characteristic difference to the aforementioned sports I had been involved in is that the learning curve in skateboarding is rather steep. I hadn’t been on a skateboard since I was a kid when entering the field, but I had bought a street skateboard for my research endeavour and had sporadically tried it out before coming to South Africa. The first attempts felt daunting. Skateboarding can be a frustrating affair and feelings of success really have to be fought for. Whereby many mainstream sports can be practised by beginners with low intensity and low risk of injury, such a mellow approach is not really possible on a skateboard. Skateboarding is more of an ‘all or nothing’ activity, punishing mistakes immediately and quite harshly. In my impression, it is especially the high difficulty and the associated risks that tend to deter beginners and bring about a kind of love-hate relationship with the sport for those sticking to it.

72 The Tony Hawk Foundation argued that athletes in skateboarding suffered statistically fewer injuries than in sports such as soccer, running and basketball (Robertson, Les (02.10.2016): How safe is skateboarding? - Tony Hawk Foundation?, Skate[Slate] Magazine, online-source: <https://skateslate.com/blog/2016/10/02/how-safe-is-skateboarding-tony-hawk-foundation> [accessed: 20.10.2020]).

73 Vee, Ruben (n.d.): Skateboarding dangerous? It’s Not That Bad, SkateboardersHQ, online-source: <https://www.skateboardershq.com/is-skateboarding-dangerous> [accessed: 20.10.2015].

74 For this purpose, I also devoted time to other sports during my fieldwork in Cape Town and Johannesburg. Thus, I trained with local ultimate frisbee teams, occasionally played soccer in informal contexts, and rode my mountainbike on trails around Table Mountain.

4.2.1 Physical risks and the art of falling

In order to understand the practical risks of injury, I will take a detailed look at the bodily practices in street skateboarding and relate them to the production of masculinity and male preponderance. As I have illuminated in the historical chapter, different skateboarding styles were gendered in different ways, with sidewalk surfing and longboarding probably having the least, and with street skateboarding having the strongest masculine connotation and male preponderance. This was reflected not only in the public image of the styles, but also visibly in their demographic composition. I argue that the significant injury risks in street skateboarding are a central element in the constitution of masculinity of its practitioners and the societal ascription as a masculine sport. Due to these risks, it allows the expression of stereotypical, traditional masculine traits: bravado, fearlessness, coolness, pain-resistance and a ruthless instrumentalisation of the body (cf. Bourdieu 2005: 93f.; Burmester/Neuber 2015: 203; Carton/Morrell 2012: 51; Connell 2005: 85f.). Street skateboarding does require riders to internalise and express these traits, and it enables their ostensible display in front of an audience, turning skateboarding into an eligible tool to acquire a masculine identity. Street skateboarding practices, and the typical places and spaces where it is carried out determine the specific risks of injury. Simple riding of a skateboard does already come with certain physical risks resulting from the potential loss of control on the fragile plank on wheels. The skateboard has the ability to confront riders with sudden, unexpected changes of direction and acceleration, even supposedly low-risk manoeuvres can at times cause heavy falls and serious injuries (Porter 2003: 42). A pebble on the ground can be enough to make a skater fall. The risk to lose control inherent in the device is multiplied in street skateboarding due to the introduction of complex manoeuvres in challenging environments complicating the controllability of the board. Even experienced practitioners are seldom able to perform the complex manoeuvres consistently. Mistakes leading to loss of control are unavoidable and omnipresent (cf. Peters 2016: 199). In skateparks and at skate spots, it was a typical phenomenon to see skaters attempting certain tricks and manoeuvres recurringly fall until they would eventually succeed. The soundscape of rolling boards was therefore continuously supplemented in such places by the sound of boards hitting the ground or rolling against objects as their owners were recurringly thrown off the board. Failing and Falling were quintessential elements of the sport and skaters often paid no attention to other skaters' falls unless they were severe. In most cases, loss of control on a skateboard can be translated into a controlled stepping or jumping off. In fact, falling safely is an important skill that skateboarders have to learn. With growing abilities, and the execution of more complex and risky tricks, the importance of correct falling to prevent injuries grows as well. Only with well-trained

falling techniques are professional skateboarders in particular able to perform the most daring manoeuvres and still pursue longer careers in skateboarding. Yet, safe falling techniques can seem quite counter-intuitive. Having unlearned their instinctive reaction, for example, I observed how advanced skaters had become accustomed to putting their arms against their body when falling in particular situations. Instead of breaking their fall with their arms, they let their upper bodies absorb the impact. While this does not prevent a painful fall, it significantly reduces the likelihood of serious, typical injuries, like fractures of the extremities.

But even though experienced skateboarders acquire falling techniques mitigating injury risks, the very character of skateboarding makes it impossible to completely exclude them. To progress and gain recognition, particularly in the professional sphere, skateboarders have to put themselves into situations where loss of control is likely and (hard) falls are unavoidable. Street skateboarding necessitates acceptance of occasional falls and injuries as an inherent part of the practice. Due to the environments skateboarding is usually practised in, risks of injury are moreover amplified. Skaters perform on smooth and hard materials, such as concrete, wood and metal, and obstacles used for tricks are often angular and narrow in shape, such as railings, benches, ledges, walls, curbs and stair sets. The performance of practices that are difficult to control, leading to occasional falls, in architectural environments that do not provide protection and shock absorption, as it is the case with many field sports, do lead to the characteristic, increased risks of injury skateboarding is notorious for (Peters, 2016, p. 199; Porter, 2003, p. 42).

Due to the aforementioned characteristics there are common injuries skateboarders suffer, which I would like to illuminate briefly here in order to provide a better understanding of what the physical price paid for skateboarding can be. In fact, small and more severe injuries happened to be an almost omnipresent problem for most of my skateboarding informants (and myself during fieldwork). The most common and recurring injuries are rather small in scale, such as abrasions, bruises and light sprains. Skaters suffer such minor injuries quickly and frequently in skate sessions. They were stoically accepted and regarded an annoying side effect by dedicated skaters I met. Despite rejecting the use of protective gear like helmets, elbow pads and wrist guards, many skaters wore long-sleeved clothing and long trousers as a preventive measure to minimise such minor injuries. Heavy falls, in comparison, can cause much more severe damages to a skater's body. A knee rammed into the ground with force, and abrasions of the legs and hips when falling at high speed can have very painful consequences. Ankles get sprained by violent landings and twisted by incorrect positioning of the feet during landing. When twisting the foot, ligaments can be severely overstretched or quickly torn. Flip tricks and jumps are a particular source of danger in this regard.

If a skateboard rotates unfavourable under the feet of a rider and lands on the side instead of on the wheels⁷⁵, attempted landing on the board quickly causes twisting of the ankles and a hard-to-control fall (cf. Peters 2016: 199). Even if skateboarders land tricks successfully, if performed from greater heights the joints can be damaged by hard impacts. Particularly feared are fractures and twists of the knee joints, and torn cruciate ligaments. Upper extremities, the elbows and wrists in particular, are exposed to a higher risk of injury. Even though these body parts are mainly used for balance in skateboarding, they come into contact with the physical environment in the event of falls. When falling during trick attempts on obstacles and when performing flip tricks on flat ground I commonly observed that skateboarders, especially beginners, ‘slipped out’ on the board or lost control. In such situations, a characteristic risk of injury results when the athletes attempt to brake their fall with their hands. As the body receives an enormous rotational speed in this event wrists and elbows sprain or fracture on impact quickly⁷⁶ (cf. Peters 2016: 199). Consequently, damaged, sprained and fractured wrist, elbow and shoulder joints had been suffered by numerous informants in the course of their careers. Especially problematic are violent impacts of the head with the ground or objects causing injuries like concussions, lacerations, heavy bruises, broken noses and knocked out teeth⁷⁷ (Snyder 2017: 44). Such serious injuries were certainly not a daily or regular occurrence among the skateboarders I spent time with, but they did play a role in the wider skater community as worst-case scenarios that occasionally happened and could force skaters to end their careers (cf. Borden 2019: 32). The magazine and video landscape was also well-stocked with documented injuries that provided an overview of common physical risks associated with the sport. In a sense, the likelihood of loss of control and the somehow high injury risks seemed to be a central aspect for skateboarding being occasionally regarded or depicted as an ‘extreme sport’ (cf. Thorpe 2014: 41). Without question, other sports do also involve risks and unanticipated factors, and have developed cultures in which bravado and a ruthless instrumentalisation of the body are celebrated. But many popular mainstream sports allow a more gradual exposition to risks evolving from the activity.⁷⁸ It seems to be the confrontation with risks that are difficult to assess and can lead to potentially serious injuries that lie at the heart of the definition of ‘extreme sports’ (cf. Peters

75 A skater unintentionally landing on the narrow edge of a skateboard lying on its side performs a so-called “Primo”. A Primo is a very unpleasant appearance, as it not only leads to a fall quickly, but can also be painful if the landing is successful due to the small contact surface for the feet.

76 This explains why advanced skateboarders put their arms against their bodies in certain falls to protect them from the force of the impact.

77 Head injuries are a particular problem because most street skateboarders do not wear helmets.

78 For example, it is possible to play football and rugby (‘flag rugby’) with rules that significantly reduce the risk of injury. In cycling and running, the intensity, level of difficulty and thus the risk of injury can be varied gradually. A similarly gradual approach is only possible within limits in skateboarding.

2016: 198).⁷⁹ ‘Putting the body on the line’ is, in other words, a constitutive element of such sports and street skateboarding certainly finds its place in this cosmos.

4.2.2 Challenging mind and body: pain, injuries and bravery in street skateboarding

Errol ‘Bong’ Strachan: You know, and you know how much effort goes like into learning a trick and how many times you, like doing specific things you actually hurt yourself. It’s that respect, man. You know that, when someone can do certain tricks on a board you got that respect, because you know the guy put in the hours and he fell a lot. That’s, that’s how I always see it, you know, a skateboard is for brave people, you know. It doesn’t matter how good or bad you are, but if you love it you are very brave as well, because there is a lot of, you like hurt yourself.

Interestingly, dealing with pain and injuries have become somehow glorified in street skateboarding culture (Borden 2019: 32; cf. Peters 2016: 200). In a slightly exaggerated way, an article in the local blunt magazine exemplified how in the world of skateboarding suffering injuries are not seldom trivialised or even addressed in an humorous way in skateboarding:

“Skateboarders are of course the most battered of all boardriders. You can’t go for a single skate without at least ripping off some of your soft skin on gruesome bricks, tar or concrete, and serious slams almost always involve broken bones, snapped tendons, or the possibility of a concussion, even death, if you pip your melon. Sprained or broken ankles, wrists, toes and fingers are common, as are ripped shins and good old roasties.” (blunt 2/5 1999: 19)

My Capetonian skate-mentor Arnie Lambert, jokingly referred to painful falls and resulting injuries as a “tax” skaters have to pay. And when fellow skateboarders limped whimpering to the side of a spot or skatepark to recover from a freshly suffered injury, Arnie frequently commented jokingly “You are paying flesh!”. From his point of view blood, skin and bones were necessary sacrifices to compensate for the moments of joy the sport offered. It was a trade one was getting involved in. Because of the sport’s toughness, among skateboarders the opinion was widespread that the sport would attract a particular type of individuals that didn’t mind receiving small injuries like bruises recurringly and who didn’t fear to suffer more serious painful experiences now and then. The

⁷⁹ In fact, I learned from a professional skateboarder in Cape Town that certain insurance companies would not insure skateboarders as they classified skateboarding as a high-risk sport.

widespread acceptance of injury risks in the South African skateboarding scene was underlined by the fact that protective gear was rarely worn, although it would have doubtlessly reduced the risks of injury substantially. Only a tiny minority of avid street skaters I encountered did protect themselves with helmets, elbow and knee protectors, and wrist guards.⁸⁰ In street skateboarding media, athletes wearing protective gear or helmets were practically absent.⁸¹ The industry provided hardly any role models in this regard. Yet, widespread rejection of protective gear led recurrently to preventable injuries in falls, such as fractures of the wrists, abrasions or concussions. What I observed among skaters in Cape Town and Johannesburg seemed exemplary of the global culture of street skateboarding. Injuries are treated like an almost natural aspect of the sport. And those who want to engage in it have to come to terms with the fact that the body has to be put on the line (cf. Snyder 2017: 44).

As an article headlined ‘Injuries: Snap, Crackle and Pop’ in the Durban-based skate magazine blunt exemplified, this is an aspect inseparable from ambitious skateboarding (cf. Abulhawa 2020: 67):

“Whether it’s bikes or boards, riding can break you. Injuries play a role in our lives, because without them there is no progression, no advancement of our sports. As long as the drive exists to go bigger, harder and faster, guys will be getting knocked down and getting back up (eventually). The true test is what you do when it happens to you.”
(blunt 7/4 2003: 53)

Injuries leave their mark and are inscribed on the skaters’ bodies. Moreover, they do not always remain without consequences. In fact, many of my trick skateboarding informants had to struggle with physical problems, acute and chronic, they had developed from skateboarding. Some of them paused or gave up skateboarding completely because they found it too physically harmful or never fully recovered from injuries. Others altered the way they skate to reduce risk and strain. And I got to know a larger number of people during my research who had been interested skateboarding, but had rapidly lost interest after having experienced a painful fall or severe injury, like a fracture. On the other hand, there were experienced skaters who had either never suffered serious injuries or whose bodies had recovered, i.e. who had not suffered any chronic damages. It also depended on

80 The skaters rejection of protective gear is partly for practical reasons, as putting on and taking off protectors is cumbersome and can ruin the spontaneousness and informal character of skate sessions. Street skaters appreciate the ‘casualness’ of the practice. Protectors and helmets also have to be carried on a skate day. In addition, safety gear can slightly limit agility and sweat accumulates underneath the equipment causing some annoyance. Fashion plays a role in the widespread rejection of safety gear too: most skaters prefer a casual, cool street look. Protectors and helmets are widely perceived as making one look ‘uncool’.

81 Many street skaters wear long trousers made from denim or cotton, though, as they offer some protection against abrasions. Some athletes wear long-sleeved jerseys or shirts for the same reason.

seemingly fortunate circumstances that some athletes suffered no long-term problems, while others permanently lost their athletic abilities due to chronic health problems. Skateboarding certainly separates ‘the wheat from the chaff’ in a quite radical way. Not everyone is durable, skilled or lucky enough to remain committed to the sport in the long term.

Risks of injury play a constitutive role in the production of subcultural recognition and masculinity in skateboarding. They are not just a parenthetical element of the practice, but a constitutive aspect within the culture of appreciation, which asks athletes to perform practices that require sacrificing their physical integrity. Different practices are valued differently depending on the risks involved, which applies to the world of tricks as well. In skateboarding, tricks do not stand side by side on an equal footing in their value, but are classified in a complex hierarchy. Certain tricks generate more recognition and attention than others. As argued in the previous part, the value of tricks is primarily connected to the stylistic aesthetic and the difficulty of their execution. The execution of particularly difficult tricks in style serves as an expression of the status in the skate scene and as proof of an investment into the practice over a longer period of time. But the hierarchy of tricks is, I argue, also built on their perceived expression of masculine traits with one important criterion being the extent of the potential risk of injury attached to their execution (cf. Borden 2019: 33).

There are a number of tricks and manoeuvres, which are of high difficulty and riskiness that enjoy particularly positive recognition in skateboarding culture globally. These manoeuvres are mostly characterised by hard-to-perform movement sequences, high speeds reached, great heights overcome and being performed in challenging architectural environments. Particularly popular manoeuvres of this quality are jumping down big stairs, high drops from roofs, walls and other objects, and grinds and slides on (steep) hand railings. Professional American skateboarders like Aaron Homoki and Brian Delatorre had become highly recognised athletes for such high-risk manoeuvres involving deep, heavy drops that seemed to blend skateboarding trick and stunt (Borden 2019: 32; Peters 2016: 203). Because commercial magazines and video magazines are central, institutionalised actors in the world of skateboarding that generated scene-wide recognition to individual athletes by giving them public exposure, the hegemonic understanding of highly recognised manoeuvres can be deduced from their representations in skateboarding media. The medially deduced hierarchy of tricks is not only based on the high numerical presence of certain tricks in videos and magazines, but also on the particular placement of tricks in the media. Investigating cover photos and highlight sections in videos allows to get a feeling for the recognised standards in the sport. Making it on the cover of a well-known skateboard-magazine signifies a particularly high degree of appreciation for a skater. Usually, covers are full sized photos promising

special visibility and they are often intended to arouse interest in a magazine precisely because of their spectacularity. In a more precise sense, a cover conveys the appreciation of the editorial staff of a magazine, which is often made up of persons recognised as being part of the elite of the skate scene whose judgement is respected. Making it on the cover of a prestigious magazines like Thrasher is therefore similar to a coronation in the world of skateboarding.

Due to the prominent position, special requirements are attached to cover photos. Skateboarders have to earn and deserve a cover photo in the eyes of other skateboarders. Not always are ‘worthy’ photos chosen by the editors of the magazines. Among skaters I met, the choice of cover photos was at times controversially discussed. It was not enough to land on a cover if the difficulty and riskiness of a performed trick didn’t legitimise it in the eyes of other skaters. When I met an NGO-representative for an interview one evening in the Yours Truly bar in Cape Town, a popular meeting place for skateboarders with good contacts in the skateboarding industry, I ended up in a round of media producers, professional skateboarders and skate NGO workers. House music was blaring from the loudspeakers and the evening became increasingly wild towards later hours with rising levels of alcohol among the guests. A new issue of the local skateboarding magazine Session had just come out and was lying on the table where we were sitting. The cover photo depicted a skateboarder performing a tailslide on a relatively flat slope at the side of a road. Neither a particularly difficult, nor a particularly dangerous trick, but surprisingly lapidary for a cover. A critical discussion of the cover photo developed:

Dlamini: That [cover photo] is not worthy.

Grant: A small obstacle.

Dlamini: That’s not worthy for a cover.

Grant: For a cover, eh?

Steve: Why shouldn’t they doing it, fancier trick?

Dlamini: No, no.

Grant: They say this is more coverish [shows another picture in the magazine to me]. This shouldn’t be on the cover.

Dlamini: A cover is like a gnarly spot, it would be a gnarly spot.

Marc: This is one of the guys doing a really tight rail [shows another picture in the magazine]. This is a super awkward spot [points on the cover].

[...]

Dlamini: Now that is worth a cover, this is a great photo [points to the other photo in the magazine], without a doubt.

In the eyes of these skateboarders, a cover photo had to document a particularly difficult, tough trick that was special and not easy to reproduce. And as professional skater Dlamini pointed out in the conversation, a cover photo should be ‘gnarly’, showing a rather risky trick that took courage. It also had to have an aesthetically pleasing quality, which was largely determined by the environment framing the trick attempt, the nature of the shot and the character of the trick performed (cf. Snyder 2012: 308ff.). A cover photo was ideally the most spectacular photo in a magazine that stood out visibly from the photographs inside and proved a high skill-level of the portrayed athlete. In this case, however, even photos in the same magazine seemed to exceed the trick shown on the cover in spectacularity, aesthetic beauty, difficulty and riskiness, violating the traditionally ascribed value of a cover photo.

‘Gnarly’ tricks enjoy special recognition because they require advanced skills and hardened nerves. They immediately prove that the skateboarders carrying them out have attained a high level of skill and fearlessness, and have potentially undergone some suffering in their production. Even when fixated in photographs, such manoeuvres evoke reverence, convey spectacularity and courage, often emphasised by the perspective of the shot and use of wide-angle lenses. This does not mean, however, that less dangerous or modest tricks are categorically excluded from making it onto a cover if they convince in aesthetic quality of the whole composition of a picture or bear witness to a high technical skill of an athlete (cf. Snyder 2012: 308).

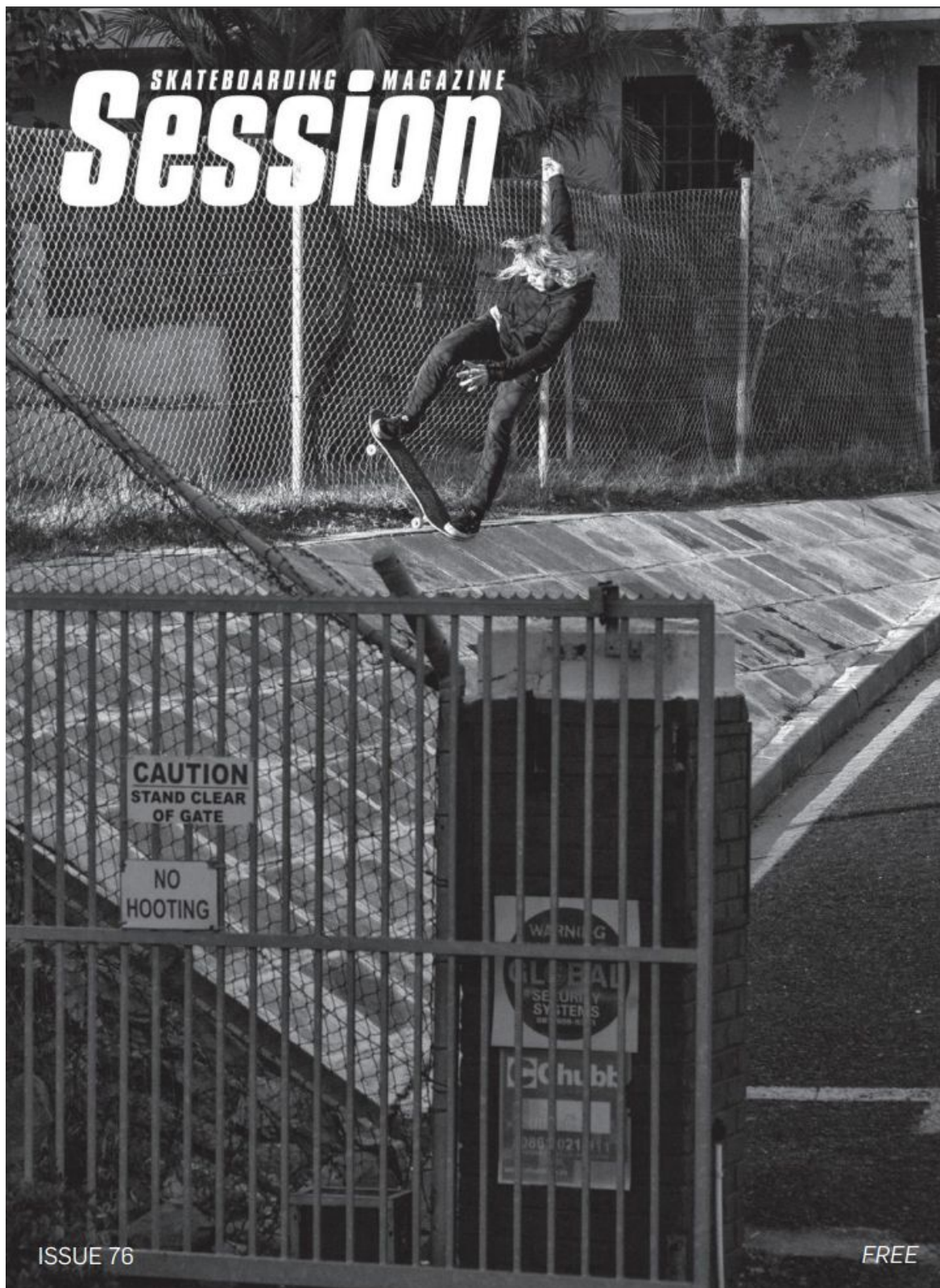


Illustration 7: The questioned cover photo depicted Justus Kotze performing a noseblunt on a mellow bank, a not very difficult, not very dangerous trick in a hardly spectacular setting. Why the picture had been chosen for the cover puzzled some skaters in Cape Town, as it hardly met the traditional requirements for a cover photo of a skateboarding magazine (source: Session 76 2016).



Illustration 8: In the previously reproduced conversation, experienced skateboarders argued that a photo of a boardslide by AM skater Chappies Galant, which was found inside the magazine, should have been placed on the cover. Compared to the cover photo, Galant performed a much harder trick on a more challenging and dangerous obstacle (source: Session 76 2016: 10-11).

Grinds and slides on handrails are among the most dangerous manoeuvres skateboarders perform and it seems to be no coincidence that they are to be found particularly frequently on the covers of skate magazines. For these tricks, skateboarders jump onto an often sloped railing leading down a stair set, slide or grind on it, and finally jump off and land. Rail tricks require a well trained physical constitution, especially with high railings, and high precision for jumping accurately onto the rail, flipping and catching a board while jumping up and balancing the skateboard on its narrow contact surface. In addition to the high skill-requirements rail-tricks demand, they are particularly frightening because falling involves a high risk of injury. Falling on a rail sideways or backwards can cause severe injuries to the head, neck, thorax, back and limbs. Furthermore, performing on a rail, a skateboarder is higher above the ground, which increases the risk of injury from a fall. In addition, skaters gain high speed on a slide or grind on steep railings, which makes control more difficult and leads to high impact forces on landing.

Moreover, rail tricks have a particularly threatening character for male skateboarders as they can cause severe injuries of the genital area, carrying the danger of physical emasculation. When skaters choose to use tall rails over which they can not stand, a fall can occur in such a way that the force of the impact is almost entirely absorbed by the crotch area. Among skateboarders this is known as ‘getting sacked’. In this respect, such tricks undoubtedly require perfected skills, nerves of steel and guts. Although female skateboarders are no less at increased risk of injury from this type of fall, they may have a slight anatomical advantage over male skateboarders. Skateboarder Melissa Williams claimed in an interview how injuries to the genitals resulting from tricks on handrails were supposedly less frightening for girls and women due to the lower severity of a potential injury: “But at least we can’t get sacked, which is probably the biggest fear for most male skaters” (blunt 7/2 2003: 59).

It is a bittersweet characteristic of skateboarding that in the blink of an eye it can turn from being a source of flow, euphoria and recognition into a source of pain, suffering and humiliation. Repeatedly I experienced the mostly minor, but painful consequences of skateboarding myself when engaging in the practice. Because frequent falls and injuries were an unavoidable part of street skateboarding, handling pain and exercising while experiencing pain could be regarded as important traits street skateboarders had to master (cf. Snyder 2017: 44; Velten 2020: 95). Advanced skateboarders had inevitably suffered recurring painful episodes over years, and had therefore proved by their status that they had already used and consumed their bodies like instruments or tools over a long period, and had withstood countless painful experiences.

It was common among skateboarders to approach injuries and pain with a certain indifference and with humour. In skateparks and at skate spots I witnessed that most skaters suffering painful injuries would often not show signs of weakness, but rather stoicism (cf. Abulhawa 2020: 76f.). If emotions were expressed in such situations, they were rather anger and frustration: skaters would rant, yell or throw their skateboard into the distance after a painful mishap. What seemed more or less absent among the skateboarders were soft emotions after painful events: crying, whimpering and other signs of suffering had no place in skateboarding (cf. Burmester/Neuber 2015). At least for children it was usually accepted to express pain and discomfort, and to cry after mishaps. Yet, more than once I witnessed how pre-adolescent boys would be discouraged to do so by other skateboarders, by their parents and even by activists of some skate NGOs. In such situations, skateboarding was employed to mediate masculine connoted behaviours like the suppression of pain and ‘soft’ emotions. Many street skaters were, in a way, hard on themselves, but also hard on the suffering of their fellow skaters. My observations here are similar to those of Peters conducting ethnographic

fieldwork among German skateboarders in Cologne. Peters described how most skaters would suppress pain and maintain their cool habitus when in sight of their peers (Peters 2016: 200; cf. cf. Abulhawa 2020: 69; Burmester/Beuber 2015: 220). Already at a young age skateboarders tended to show a certain ignorance and laxity towards injuries and painful events, fulfilling the respective norms and ideals in the scene. The latter were also influentially disseminated through the media, where weak and soft emotions were practically absent in skateboarding magazines and videos while a reckless treatment of the body tended to be accepted and even celebrated (cf. Peters 2015: 200f.). Toughness against the self was somehow regarded as an inherent aspect of the skateboarding lifestyle, as a poem emphasised that a street skateboarder from Johannesburg had posted on a social media platform:

“bumps, bruises, and broken bones
The blood that pours from open wounds
The stitches needed to mend the cuts
All of this can become too much

The death-defying leaps of faith
The frightening heights at which you face
You still decide to risk your life
Just because it all feels right

Some people do it day and night
Just because it’s a way of life
To have the thrill without a pill
Skateboarding is my way of life”⁸²

During my fieldwork, I encountered the instrumentalisation of the body in several ways at skate spots, in skateparks and on ‘street missions’. Not only was pain most often suppressed and injuries taken with a certain indifference, but some skaters also continued to skate after having suffered painful injuries, if these were not too bad. Several times I experienced how skaters injured their joints slightly, for example twisting a foot, or hit one of their shins or knees badly after a failed trick attempt, but kept on going ignoring the pain and dripping of blood from damaged tissue. To me this seemed remarkable when comparing to my experiences in other sports such as football, ultimate frisbee and cycling, where athletes tended to take breaks to allow injuries to heal to keep their bodies healthy, intact and powerful in the long-term. Of course, there were also moments in such sports when athletes finished a race, a match or a competition despite injuries. Among amateurs,

82 black_boy_2.fly_photography (05.02.2021): Skater girls [images & text], Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CK43YOWhtPw/?igshid=11ui180vtjczp> [accessed: 04.05.2021].

however, such a thing was exceedingly rare. Although I also met skaters who took care of their bodies and rested them when they had problems, skating despite acute health problems was visibly common. A particularly remarkable case of a skateboarder suffering an injury and continuing to skate I witnessed during a skate contest in Parow, Cape Town, in March 2017:

A local, non-commercial skateboarding organisation, the Tygerberg Initiative, had organised a contest in the parking lot of a supermarket. The small temporary skatepark consisting of a couple kickers, quarter pipes and rails was packed with about 30 skateboarders. The contest was a typical amateur tournament, with every skateboarder having two one-minute-runs to perform his or her best tricks. A jury of three (former) professional skaters judged the runs. Only one young woman was competing among a larger number of boys and young men, and took the third place in the end. One situation took the breath away from everyone present. One participant, probably around 20 years old, suffered a heavy fall during his run. He ollied over a curb bordered flowerbed that was amidst the obstacles. But he lost his balance during the jump, rotated backwards and slammed violently with the back of his head on the curb. The skater remained lying on his side motionless after the fall, with a grotesquely distorted face. “Does he have a seizure or something”, a spectating skateboarder asked his friend standing beside me. Paramedics who sat on the side of the skatepark immediately rushed to the skateboarder and treated him on the spot, there was silence in the park while the crowd and most other athletes watched anxiously. After a few minutes the young skater was able to stand up, walk shakily to a bench on the side, sat down with the paramedics and gave a thumbs-up to the crowd. Some of the bystanders were clapping. The skate contest could continue. After about 30 minutes something unexpected happened: The skateboarder had regained some of his strength and reappeared at the starting line, attempting his second run and performing tricks while still looking visibly weakened. After the end of the young man’s run, thunderous applause erupted, he was celebrated by the crowd. Ameer, the skateboarding coach of a local skate NGO looked at me with sparkling eyes: “Wow, that is dedication!”. I found it quite unusual that an athlete was let back into an amateur contest shortly after he had suffered a serious blow to the head resulting in temporary unconsciousness. Apparently, hardly any of the skateboarders around me found this questionable. Rather, as Ameer commented, it seemed to be seen as an act of extraordinary dedication and passion for the sport, and also to underline the enormous taker qualities of this young man.

This episode underlined how the radical instrumentalisation of the body and hardness against the self was to a certain extent common, appreciated and even celebrated in skateboarding. Being a street skater was connected to the notion of being physically hard on oneself, and demonstrating such toughness in public proved a street skater’s identity and credibility to a certain degree. Sometimes skateboarders were also encouraged by other skaters ‘to skate out’ a painful injury, which just meant not to spare themselves but to continue skating as if this would be beneficial for the healing process, or as if pain was a misleading feeling that could be ignored instead of being

read as a serious message of the body to reduce the load. Several times I met skateboarders who were still in the healing process after having fractured their wrists, arms or collar bones, and were already on the board again wearing the fracture stabilising splints instead of letting the fracture heal out. Quite a few skateboarders I got to know did not allow themselves much recovery time after more serious injuries, but rather started to skate sooner rather than later. In this context an article in the American skateboard magazine *Jenkem* became understandable, in which skaters were informed about various injuries and called to treat them appropriately to prevent long-term health issues. The article was introduced with the following words:

“A lot of injuries [among skateboarders] go untreated and end up getting worse as they heal improperly, which can cause major problems down the road. Neglected injuries are usually due to either lack of funds to cover a hospital bill, or just simple ignorance. To help, we put together a short guide of the most common injuries in skating as well as some tips on what you can do to not fuck up the healing process so you can be back on your board and getting hurt again in no time.”⁸³

American professional skateboarder Marisa Del Santo had experienced that such a warning statement unfolded particular relevance in the professional sector. Although pro-skaters were particularly dependent on a well-functioning body, a reckless treatment of the body was sometimes downright expected from them. Del Santo experienced this when breaking her ankle and foot in a failed attempt to grind a handrail in a film shoot. She was pressured by the film team to retry the manoeuvre despite the injury until she would succeed. She did, in fact, manage to pull the trick off with the fracture and the film team got the desired material. Yet, Del Santo was unable to skate for the next five months afterwards.⁸⁴

The culture of hard instrumentalisation of the body was reflected in skateboarding media, where even a certain fascination and glorification of injuries could be made out. In videos and in magazines occasionally freshly suffered or treated injuries were depicted close-up (cf. Porter 2003: 42, 52). The popular American skateboarding magazine *Thrasher* released videos of particularly heavy, and in some cases life-threatening falls of skateboarders in its video-series titled ‘Hall of Meat’⁸⁵ (Butz 2012: 228). In South Africa, the local skateboarding magazine *blunt* contained recurring articles on this topic, most of which reported in a humorous way on serious injuries such

83 Maloney, Pat/Miller, Walker (30.03.2017): The *Jenkem* Guide To Skate Injuries, *Jenkem Magazine*, online-source: <http://www.jenkemmag.com/home/2017/03/30/jenkem-guide-skate-injuries> [accessed: 25.07.2020].

84 Lanza, Larry (05.12.2017): What Happened To Marisa Dal Santo?, *Jenkem Magazine*, online-source: <http://www.jenkemmag.com/home/2017/12/05/happened-marisa-dal-santo> [accessed: 26.08.2019].

85 *Thrasher Magazine*: Hall of meat [website], *Thrasher Magazine*, online-source: <https://www.thrasher magazine.com/hall-of-meat> [accessed: 16.09.2020].

as bone fractures and joint dislocations. Occasionally, some skateboarders posted pictures and videos of heavy falls and suffered injuries on social media. Moreover, it was not uncommon for skateboarders I interviewed to talk lengthy about injuries and how they had suffered them. These injury stories were often told in a humorous, trivialising and sometimes boastful way, underlining the heroic sacrifices and deprivations made for the sake of the sport, and the mental and physical strength of the athletes (cf. Abulhawa 2020: 76f.; Jones 2011). This was exemplified when skate veteran Errol Strachan recounted the various injuries he had to deal with in his career in an interview:

Errol: Ya, I had all my fingers broken since back, from doing freestyle. You remember when my ankle was this size [shows an imaginary football with his hands] [laughing] I could still walk on that day, it was this size, dude. What happened with, it was a skating accident yeah. I was, they were teaching me to ollie and I came down like this [shows how he twisted his foot], you know, like full body weight, it was ugly man. Ya, once I had shattered chin bones and I didn't even know. I was skating until 10 and I walked and I felt my chins squish, and I felt it was my blood and sweat and I took, I took it off at home, and it was big, like this size.

Arnie: Double.

Errol: Skin, and there was blood under that, and I pierced and blood just came out, and then I felt all the splints in my, and I didn't even go to a doctor, I just packed it with ice and paused for about three months.

Interviewer: Really, oh.

Errol: Knocking fingers also, this finger [shows his finger] was that way [finger unnaturally bent to the side] and I just did that [forcefully relocated his finger] because I felt it didn't break, just the ligament went, and that finger gets hurt, and this finger also. This finger is messed. This finger is just locked in there permanently. And then there are stitches in my arm from Downhill [laughing].

The careers of skateboarders like Strachan seemed to be equally defined by their trick and injury portfolio. Anecdotes of injury experiences and flaunting scars seemed to highlight the willingness to instrumentalise one's own body. They proved the deep motivation felt for the sport that is even worth to break bones, tore ligaments and twist ankles (cf. Peters 2016: 204; Petrone 2010: 124). In a way, street skateboarding culture comprised an appreciation of masochist acts⁸⁶, as former professional skateboarder Marisa Del Santo was stating “[...] there's this bro and testosterone

86 This aspect was radically underlined by the MTV series *Jackass*, which was broadcasted in the early 2000s. There, pro skateboarders like Bam Margera performed and filmed risky, painful and masochistic stunts in public space.

culture [in skateboarding]. Men are like masochists. They like getting punched in the face and getting hurt.”⁸⁷ While violent acts against others were usually strictly rejected among skateboarders, a certain appreciation was given to violence against the self (cf. Abulhawa 2020: 70). For skateboarders like Friedel, this could even lead to them acting out tendencies for self-harm through the sport (Friedel 2015: 82). American skateboarding legend Rodney Mullen had described in his autobiography that skateboarding can amount to a form of violence against the self (Mullen/Mortimer 2004: 131; cf. Messner 1990: 208).

And, in fact, injuries were not only a price that had to be paid occasionally, but they constituted a resource for gaining respect and recognition among skaters. As Abulhawa argued, withstanding injuries and pain tended to work as a means to build subcultural authenticity in the world of skateboarding (Abulhawa 2020: 76f.). I experienced this myself during fieldwork. After breaking my wrist in Johannesburg in 2017 when skating with a group of street skateboarders, and subsequently showing up in skateparks and at skate spots with a plaster cast, I had the impression of getting particular recognition for my injury from some skateboarders. Similarly, when I returned to the field one year later with the long scar on my left under arm reminding me of this painful episode for the rest of my life, I felt it did generate recognition among some skaters in a similar way. Although the accident leading to the injury was rather unspectacular, the impressive result seemed to signal my comprehensive commitment: I had demonstrated my willingness to put my body on the line, I had paid the ‘tax’, as Arnie Lambert would have remarked. Practically I might have experienced what Borden (2001: 149) had described as male bonding through injuries and pain in skateboarding culture. To some degree, I had become part of the informal club of boys and men putting their bodies on the line for skateboarding. When I spoke to Johannesburg street skateboarder Joel, he emphasised how the shared physical hardships could generate a felt bond between skaters:

Joel: It’s more if anything skateboarders are more biased towards like how dedicated somebody is, that is why the whole poser thing is so strong and stuff.

Interviewer: I see.

Joel: It’s like ‘this thing hurts, are you really willing to do it? And are you willing to prove yourself?’ That type of thing. More than it is like ‘I am a real skateboarder’, because then you will see like dudes congregating on that basis of like ‘this is our mentality, and this is the people we choose to be with, so we gonna stick together, but we all share this common thing of skateboarding’.

87 Lanza, Larry (05.12.2017): What Happened To Marisa Dal Santo?, Jenkem Magazine, online-source: <http://www.jenkemmag.com/home/2017/12/05/happened-marisa-dal-santo> [accessed: 26.08.2019].

The particular physical hardships connected to the practice form a suitable platform for expressing a form of physically tough, risk-taking, daredevil and heroic masculinity when overcoming them. Young skaters literally ‘assault’ their bodies in the name of a manly art (Bourdieu 2005: 93f.; Connell 2005: 58). If one follows the comments of authors such as Morrell (2001a: 18) on the historical intertwining of masculinity and sport, skateboarding easily aligns with concepts of sportive masculinity emphasising physical toughness and ‘taker’ qualities that had also gained widespread and high recognition in a number of other sports, like rugby and soccer. Those who take on the self-chosen breakneck challenges and instrumentalise their bodies like tools to engage self-imposed challenges can become recognised members of the (imagined) subcultural masculine community of skateboarders (cf. Bourdieu 2005: 96; Connell 1987: 85ff.; Heissenberger 2012: 222).

Of course, skateboarders were not cold-blooded machines, but emotional beings with fragile human bodies. And as much as many skaters tended to act cool when approaching challenging manoeuvres, facing risks unavoidably caused fears that all skateboarders had to deal with. Neither beginners, who did their first baby steps on a skateboard, nor professional athletes, who attempted daring stunts, were immune from fear. Accordingly, in an article in the magazine *Transworld* several professional skaters described their strategies to deal with fear before attempting difficult tricks.⁸⁸ Skateboarding confronts one with tests of courage continuously if one aims for progression, and leads practitioners to repeatedly enter situations putting their abilities to an unprecedented test on a device that is hard to control.

This does not mean that fear is the defining emotion in skateboarding. Skaters are looking for joy, fun, pleasant adrenaline rushes and feelings of success. In sessions, skaters engage primarily in practices that are familiar and low-risk enough not to cause fear.⁸⁹ The fact that skaters face difficult challenges that require courage now and then, much more often in the professional field than among recreational riders, does not imply that skateboarding can be reduced to a fear-inducing ordeal. Skateboarding is a very demanding activity requiring full attention at all times that recurrently rewards practitioners with a sense of achievement, enabling the experience of what Csikszentmihalyi had termed flow (Jackson/Csikszentmihalyi 1999; cf. Friedel 2015: 85). The sport is able to provide practitioners an effective distraction from the problems of everyday life by

88 Swisher, Eric (02.03.2018): Technique: Handrails: Eric Swisher invited a legendary roster of rail chompers to field a questionnaire on handrails, *Transworld Skateboarding*, online-source: <https://skateboarding.transworld.net/photos/technique-handrails> [accessed: 20.09.2020].

89 For example, day-to-day skating for most skaters was limited to low obstacles and relatively low speeds, so that falls were accompanied by relatively low risks of injury and minor injuries. (Good) skate parks were also built and designed in such a way that the risk of injury was relatively low for practitioners.

offering a joyful experience, that is only now and then disturbed by falls and more or less serious injuries.

Yet, managing fear plays a recurring role when it comes to attempting tricks at new spots and obstacles, and performing hard-to-control manoeuvres and tricks that have been just learned recently, especially when shooting photos and videos. Fear and anxiety resulting from the practice are unpleasant yet helpful psychological mechanisms, reminding skateboarders of the potentially painful consequences of their actions, but they can also have something pleasantly exciting about them. When one just manages to prevent a fall, master a challenging situation and one's heart 'stops' for a second, a pleasant feeling of thrill can be the result. For beginners, it can be relatively harmless manoeuvres, like rolling down a hill at higher speed or dropping in on a ramp for the first time, that cause adrenaline rushes. Fear-inducing manoeuvres of advanced skateboarders, though, are on another level. Here, risks are multiplied through high speeds, high jumps and drops, and daring balancing acts on unforgiving architecture. Through their skating and falling skills acquired over years of experience, advanced skaters are able to perform very dangerously looking manoeuvres and still get away from falls relatively unharmed. But also they can never exclude risks comprehensively as always something unexpected could happen leading to loss of control and heavy falls. As the Jenkem Mag put it, "[i]t doesn't matter if you're a pro or just a dad trying your kid's board after a few cold ones, slamming happens to the best of us"⁹⁰. Seen in this light, skateboarding resembles at times a game of chance, with the body being the stake (cf. Velten 2020: 80). Consequently, skateboarders have not only to train their physical dispositions, but also their mental abilities to manage fear and to be able to engage in the self-chosen challenges. That dealing with fear is a common issue that presumably concerned all skaters to some degree was illustrated by a reader's letter in blunt magazine:

"Dear blunt, I would like to know if you ever get used to fear? When you are in the air and you know you are going to bust your face open and get 40 stitches in your right arm. And then you think to yourself, why am I doing this to myself? For what? But the next day you are back trying the same move, again and again and again, until you succeed. [...] If you've got your mind focused on something and keep trying, you will succeed in the end, no matter how far-fetched. If you don't, you didn't try hard enough. So don't be afraid to try anything you want to. Think how mad they thought the first guy was who tried to ollie or kickflip." (blunt 5/1 2001: 9)

90 Maloney, Pat/Miller, Walker (30.03.2017): The Jenkem Guide To Skate Injuries, Jenkem Magazine, online-source: <http://www.jenkemmag.com/home/2017/03/30/jenkem-guide-skate-injuries> [accessed: 25.07.2020].

During fieldwork I witnessed numerous strategies among skateboarders to deal with and manage fear when attempting challenging manoeuvres. Some of the experienced skateboarders I spent time with had small rituals to alleviate their fear before trying difficult feats.⁹¹ Others made use of the anxiety-reducing effect of alcohol and marijuana. Coping with anxiety was not only an individual matter, but often involved the input of peers. In groups this could involve motivation and slight social pressure. But rarely did I experience anxious skateboarders being persuaded or pushed by their skating peers to attempt a trick. Since other skateboarders knew from their own experience the challenge of having to overcome fear and that it was sometimes better to listen to the fear than to force a trick, the decision was usually left to the rider and supported by the environment.

However, sometimes peers would exert shallow pressure and encourage doubters to take the risk against their fears. When training beginners, this was an important part of an experienced skater's mentoring of apprentices into uncharted territory. After all, advanced skaters knew from their own experience that the only way to develop skills and to overcome fear is performing manoeuvres in spite of fear. It is not possible to approach certain manoeuvres carefully by gradually increasing the difficulty. They have to be performed fully committed, or not at all, like dropping in on a ramp. Learners sometimes have to put themselves in a risky situation that they may not be able to handle, because the skills to master them can only be gained through practical attempt and the resulting gain in experience. Once certain manoeuvres have been successfully performed a few times, they lose their frightening quality. For example, in skate NGOs offering skateboarding workshops to children, it was characteristic that experienced skaters encouraged participants through motivating words and light pressure to try manoeuvres they were afraid of. Yet, it could sometimes take days or weeks before kids felt ready to attempt certain tricks. If apprentices overcame their fear and succeeded, the fear of performing the respective manoeuvre would gradually disappear and a certain form of routine would develop. This experience seemed characteristic among skateboarders, who thus recurrently were confronted with fear, but also with the liberating feeling of overcoming it and extending their abilities, only to be confronted with another more or less fear-inducing challenge soon after. Skateboarding is therefore not a purely physical challenge, but also a psychological one. This was an often voiced aspect when skateboarders and NGO-activists spoke of skateboarding's educational value and ability to build character, particularly regarding teaching resilience, bravery, willpower and continuous strive to self-improvement (cf. Friedel 2015: 89). The sport can push practitioners to their frustration and stress threshold on a recurring basis: Enduring and overcoming failure is an important skill of successful skaters. At times, the process of mastering a new

⁹¹ Snyder reported that some US-American pro skaters had adopted "OCD- like behaviours and ticks that they believe help them to clear their minds and focus on the trick" (Snyder 2017: 44).

manoeuvre on a particular architectural element could take on the character of a fight between the skateboarder, the skateboard and the obstacle(s). Accordingly, skaters would sometimes term the countless attempts to do a specific trick at a certain architectural arrangement as ‘fighting with a spot’, which seemed to be a fitting description when watching them struggling with a self-imposed, fear-inducing challenge. The video series ‘My War’⁹² produced by the renowned Thrasher Magazine, which revolved around the ordeal of skaters attempting particularly difficult tricks on certain obstacles, also clearly referred to this aspect. A successfully mastered trick was therefore occasionally perceived as a ‘defeat of a spot’. If an athlete successfully performed impressive manoeuvres, I could sometimes hear among skaters: “He/she killed it!”. This linguistically emphasised the somewhat confrontational relationship between skaters and the architecture they perform on. Although the skaters actively approach the architecture, the latter almost has to be fought with almost like a threatening opponent. Trick attempts on certain obstacles can take on the character of a grim battle where the well-being of the athletes is at stake and spectators hold their breath with every trick attempt. Especially when first attempts result in falls and (minor) injuries, and full concentration is required while facing fear, frustration and pain, trick attempts can take on the character of an ordeal. In such situations, the playful side of the sport can completely disappear, turning instead into a serious matter, as in case of a ‘defeat’, the skaters can leave the field physically and mentally⁹³ ‘beaten’. Serious street skateboarding can bring euphoric sensations, but also merciless torment. If difficult trick attempts are successful, the joy over the achievement can be mixed with the relief of the athlete and the bystanders that the ‘fight’ has been survived (relatively) unscathed. This dynamic was well conveyed in a skate trip report in Session Magazine, in which a skater named Anthony struggled at a hard-to-ride spot:

“[...] it was getting colder and we all felt thrashed but there was still one spot for Anthony to conquer [...] Anthony had to really push himself to go for it – the landing was super narrow and sketch and an ugly bail or two was inevitable. After his first attempt the rail started bending and we realized he was going to miss the landing by far, so we rebuilt it and bent the rail back again. Anthony ate proper shit sticking on the landing and went flying into some rough tar. He persisted in attacking the rail with the cold, pain and pressure weighing down on him. A few tries later he regained his guts and tried putting another one down, this time landing just right. We were beyond blown away, waking the whole neighbourhood with our hooligan cheers.” (Session 48 2012: 27)

92 Thrasher Magazine (n.d.): My War [website], Thrasher Magazine, online-source: <https://www.thrasher magazine.com/my-war/> [accessed: 17.10.2020].

93 A serious fall at a particular obstacle that put a skater out of action for weeks or months could, for good reasons, lead athletes to stay permanently away from the respective spot or obstacle out of fear. Not all skaters force success and come to terms with their limitations.

After an accomplished manoeuvre at a difficult spot, the skaters would often not return for a rerun, at least not with the same trick when the goal was to produce videos or photos. In a way, a spot is ticked off an imagined list once mastery has been documented, it has been ‘conquered and defeated’. In skateboarding, this is known as the ‘already-been-done’-principle (ABD) (Dupont 2014: 11). In an interview, Samuel summed this up in his own words:

Samuel: That’s exactly the point, you come to a spot, you think, what the fuck do I do on this, think about, dada, and this is also why I say, the real skateboarding is in here [points at his head], it’s in the mind, that’s essential what makes you land a trick. It’s, it’s just more than riding a plank, it’s gotta get you thinking, you know. And then you try to perform there for three months, same spot, every time you go there, you don’t get it. And then eventually you ride away. And you fucked the spot, you know, that was four months. It was all just worth it [laughing.] You are fucking done with that trick, you not try that again, you know.

On the one hand, with his statement Samuel touched on the personal level of success: Once done, a skater has proven to himself or herself that he or she can perform a particular trick at a particular location. Doing the same thing again does not provide the same sense of achievement and satisfaction.⁹⁴ Above that, according to the ABD-principle, a particular trick on a particular obstacle at a certain spot largely loses its representational value as soon as it has been performed successfully once. This is of high importance in the media discourse around sport, where it does yield barely any points to document an achievement that has been documented before by another skater. Readers may feel reminded of mountaineers who receive special recognition only for the first (documented) ascent of a particular mountain. Of course, climbing a summit also provides some recognition for latecomers, but not to the same extent as for the pioneers. Recognition in skateboarding culture follows a similar logic. Skateboarding is all about pioneering specific trick-obstacle combinations, turning skaters into some kind of conquerors of urban public infrastructure.⁹⁵ At spots that have already been skated by others, athletes have to come up with a new trick-obstacle-combo that, in the best case, surpasses what has already been performed there in style and difficulty. As soon as this is achieved, the athletes ‘write’ themselves into the history of a spot or particular obstacle when documented on photo or video. Getting recognition requires permanent

94 If a skateboarder repeats a trick attempt there is also the risk to fail again and to not leave the spot as ‘winner’. It is therefore the safest option after a success to leave it at a good attempt. But it is precisely because of this circumstance that it can bring special recognition when skaters decide to repeat a trick attempt and improve on their first try. For here the tokens are thrown into the ring again, even though it had already been left victorious.

95 Very attractive, therefore, is the discovery of new spots in which no trick history has yet been inscribed (or recorded). At ‘uncharted’ spots skateboarders have all liberties, every trick at such a spot is a novelty and valuable. There, skaters can inscribe themselves in the history of the sport by documenting ‘a first’ (cf. Snyder 2017: 71).

innovation and the continuous development of new trick-obstacle combinations (Snyder 2017: 70). The ABD-principle explains why pro-skaters in particular are basically constantly on the lookout for new spots and obstacles.

In practical terms, this means that skaters can never rest, but have to continuously face new, not yet mastered challenges that, resembling some form of a test of courage, involve physical and psychological aspects. Each new challenge resembles a walk into the unknown because each spot is different and the athletes have to use all their skills to adeptly manoeuvre the fragile device in the respective environment. And every successful attempt is recognised in a double sense, as a successful physical and psychological performance. If a skater's 'fight' with a challenging spot ends well, it is not uncommon to hear shouts of joy, lively whistles and firm hugs between athletes and bystanders as celebration of the practical achievement, but also as an expression of euphoria that follows the relief from psychological tension (cf. Abulhawa 2020: 76f.).

4.2.3 The practical constitution of masculinity in skateboarding

Based on my consideration of the role of injury risks, injuries, fear and overcoming fear in skateboarding, I argue that street skateboarding masculinity is substantially constituted by the interplay of these aspects. The practical core of street skateboarding can ideally harmonise with stereotypically masculine connoted attributions and characteristics. Focusing on its practical characteristics, skateboarding is excellently suited for the acquisition and display of masculine traits. This particularly concerns widespread ideals of youth and young adult masculinity, proved through displays of physical fitness, toughness, physical prowess and risk-taking behaviour (Connell 2005: 43; Connell/Messerschmidt 2005: 851; Morrell 2001b: 13; Langa 2020: 14). Street skateboarding can be conceptualised as a 'serious game over masculinity' in Bourdieu's sense (Bourdieu 2005: 93f.): A playful activity in which hardship against oneself and, in a sense, hardship against the suffering of others is learned and lived out. It is a context where masculine connoted traits can be proven, without ever losing the playful aspect, but also without stripping the game from seriousness and its potentially far-reaching consequences to practitioners (cf. Abulhawa 2020: 69f.). The masculine attributes displayed through practice are mutually recognised by the boys and men constituting the street skateboarding scene: When witnessing each other in real life and when consuming the steady stream of skate-media documenting heroic acts of other skateboarding boys and men. Street skateboarding is as much a social space where certain masculine values and traits can be expressed, proven and glorified to oneself and others, as it is a space where bodies and individual's relationships to their bodies are being shaped according to norms and values

traditionally viewed masculine (cf. Bantjes/Nieuwoudt 2014: 381; Connell 1987: 87; Kimmel 2008: 47; Morrell 2001a: 79). Thus, skateboarding can be understood, as Connell had put it referring to sports, as a “skilled bodily activity” acting partly as a “prime indicator of masculinity” (Connell/Messerschmidt 2005: 851; cf. Goffman 1977: 322). A characteristic difference from some other ‘serious games of masculinity’, like many male dominated, competitive forms of sport, concerns the role of interpersonal violence. In skateboarding, violence against others is regarded illegitimate within the game. Sacrificing one’s own physical integrity, on the other hand, a form of violence against the self, is glorified (cf. Messner 1990: 208). Referring to Connell’s comments on the role of the body in tough masculine sporting worlds, in street skateboarding “[t]he body is virtually assaulted in the name of masculinity and achievement” (Connell 2005: 58). In this respect, skateboarding masculinity is fast paced, heavily instrumentalising the body involving the acceptance of recurring injuries and long-term health problems (cf. Schäfer 2020: 95). But it is also a peaceful masculinity insofar as harming others maintains no legitimacy.

Despite the fact that skateboarders put their bodies on the line to varying degrees and that there is a larger share of skaters who care for their own and other skater’s health much more than others, the masculinity described above is hegemonic within skateboarding because it is the most recognised in the scene and the scene’s mediated discourse (cf. Connell/Messerschmidt 2005). Only those who risk their bodies comprehensively can rise to the highest ranks of the recognition hierarchy among street skateboarders, as progression requires approaching one’s limits, and the most daring manoeuvres are the highest valued. Skaters of all skill levels are pushed and enticed by the norms and values defined by the professional athletes who are celebrated in the national and global media landscape for constantly pushing the limits. Regardless of their particular level of skill, skateboarders are united by shared experiences characteristic of the sport. Certainly, every advanced skateboarder has proven his or her deep dedication and the willingness to sacrifice the body, and has become a member of the (imagined) community that was occasionally referred to by skaters as a ‘brotherhood’ or even ‘family’. This (imagined) community has something highly inclusive about it for the boys and men participating in it, as ‘membership’ is solely bound to the practical dedication to the sport whereas the social position in the wider society is thought largely irrelevant (cf. Snyder 2017: 56, 58). For ambitious skaters, skateboarding can be an important pillar of identity and social space in which they find acceptance and recognition as boys and men in a male dominated community (cf. Borden 2001: 149).

4.2.4 Ageing in a young men's game

Yet, the masculinity and masculine solidarity produced through skateboarding is, like many forms of masculinity produced through physically demanding practices, of temporary quality. Aging and decline in physical abilities lead to limited performability of skateboarding masculinity when the skaters' bodies' capabilities deteriorate. Hence, skaters have to struggle with the same problems as athletes in other physically demanding disciplines: Physical practice has to be reduced in intensity or abandoned altogether at some point with increasing age (Denham 2010: 146).

Generally, the street skateboarding scene is permeated by an age related hierarchy which is not fundamentally different from such hierarchies in other spheres of society and which are closely connected to the capability of physical performance and general experience. Also in skateboarding there are children, adolescents, adults and elders, who each occupy typical social positions and roles. The career of ambitious skateboarders in (young) adulthood has in many cases started during childhood in a playful and often self-determined manner (cf. Snyder 2017: 105). It is usually in the later childhood and adolescence that a deeper interest and understanding of skateboarding conventions and the world of recognised tricks and manoeuvres develops, and that the physical and psychological skills are acquired to engage in advanced trick skateboarding. This is simultaneously the phase in which gender inequalities become very visible. The proportion of girls and young women tends to fall sharply, as the masculine connotation of the sport causes conflicts with the gender role expectations in the wider society (I will discuss this aspect in more detail later in the chapter) (cf. Abulhawa 2020: 98f.). On the other hand, skateboarding becomes particularly attractive to some boys and (young) men because of its masculine connotation (cf. Langa 2020: 14). Regardless of gender, young adulthood is the time of blooming for skaters, in which they can prove their maximum potential and make a name for themselves. Due to the rather heavy load on the body in street skateboarding, and the often growing responsibilities when progressing into adulthood, the phase of top performance ends, as in other physically demanding sports, usually in the early and mid-30s. Only few skateboarders manage to maintain their peak performance until reaching their 40s, but are, if they continue to skateboard, often adjusting their skateboarding practice towards much more mellow territory.

Many of my older informants chose to just occasionally rode their boards now and then, but largely lost touch with the (competitive) skate scene. These older skateboarders had to 'take it slower' as their stamina and agility were decreasing. In addition, the aged bodies healed more slowly and had to be treated much more carefully. Moreover, the physical stresses were inscribed in the bodies with scars and chronic injuries that could further limit the physical abilities. Several of my older

informants, who were between 30 and 50 years old, had to deal with the consequences of injuries they had suffered through the sport. The skaters had to struggle with similar physical problems as competitive athletes in other sports who had damaged their bodies through ruthless instrumentalisation over many years (Denham 2010: 146; cf. Messner 1990: 211f.). As Gareth, who was approaching 40 when I met him, put it in Johannesburg, “street skateboarding is a deterioration sport” that involves wearing down the equipment, the environment and the body. Gareth knew what he was talking about, as his knees had been chronically damaged by skateboarding for more than 20 years consistently. Now that his knees were already noticeably weakened, he limited himself to low-impact practices and yet, as he explained, his knees still needed at least a day to recover from a mellow afternoon session. Even when skaters manage to not suffer any more severe injuries during their careers, the sport can cause chronic damages to the lower extremities, because skateboards provide barely any shock absorption, despite the fact that the sport is to a large degree about jumping on and off obstacles in concrete environments. Over time, the recurring impacts to the knees and ankles can cause wear and tear of the joints, damages to the cartilaginous mass, and arthritis in the long-term. In an article in Jenkem Mag sore joints were described as a characteristic problem of ageing skaters:

“As old age takes its toll, sore knees and ankles are unavoidable. Regardless, if you’re jumping down sets or even skating curbs, you’re going to feel the years of impact on your joints some day. [...] Think of your newly acquired permanent damage as a skateboarding badge of honor.”⁹⁶

The deterioration of the body has immediate consequences for the practice of skateboarders. It has to be practised much more carefully, which precludes being able to conform to the norms and ideals of spectacular skateboarding. Some manoeuvres may no longer be executable in the first place and older skateboarders simply struggle to keep up to the standard younger men set (cf. Borden 2019: 37). The bodily capital acquired over many years of hard practice and suffering is unavoidably temporary. In fact, the more radically athletes devote themselves to the activity and push their bodies to the limits, the more severely and rapidly the bodily capital is going to vanish at some point (in the most extreme case through death). The more the boys and young men surrender to the respected standards of skateboarding and risk their physical integrity for recognition in the serious game, the higher the physical price to be paid later in life (cf. Messner 1990: 211f.). The flame of

96 Maloney, Pat/Miller, Walker (30.03.2017): The Jenkem Guide To Skate Injuries, Jenkem Magazine, online-source: <http://www.jenkemmag.com/home/2017/03/30/jenkem-guide-skate-injuries> [accessed: 25.07.2020].

very ambitious street skateboarders therefore often burns intensely, but also burns out rather quickly (cf. Messner 1990: 212; Mullen/Mortimer 2004: 254f.).

Especially for men who have produced and performed their masculinity partly or mainly through skateboarding, this can be a tragic circumstance, similar to the experiences of male athletes in other masculine work, play and sports cultures. It is the biological limitations of the human body that determines that skateboarders can only participate in the masculine game for a limited time. At a certain point, male athletes have to come to terms with the fact that the time of competitive engagement in the masculine game is over and an important, maybe even central resource for the production of masculinity has to be given up (cf. Denham 2010: 147; Messner 1990: 212). Ageing athletes can be confronted with an identity crisis that touches their subcultural identity and identity as men alike. But for some men, it opens the opportunity to take up the sport in a new, gentler and healthier way. These themes were recurrent among older skateboarders, most of whom I met in their late 30s, 40s and some in their 50s. A deeper look into the situation of ageing skateboarding men seems worthy not only to include their perspectives into the analysis, but also because it allows further reflection about the connection of skateboarding and masculinity.

The veteran skaters I encountered dealt with the challenges connected to ageing differently. Some gave up the practice and turned to other things in life, a few got a place in the small skate economy and so stayed connected to the scene, many once ambitious skaters practised occasionally with less intensity, visiting skateparks and events, and maintaining their contacts and friendships. For some of the athletes I met, it was a longer process before they accepted that with their aged and damaged bodies, they could no longer engage in certain practices and thus no longer play their accustomed role in the subculture. Mike, for example, a skateboard trainer in his early 30s managing a skate NGO in Cape Town, had developed a problem with the ligaments in his left foot when I met him in the beginning of my research. In consequence, he was feeling pain when performing ollies and flip tricks. After ignoring the pain for some time, hoping it would disappear by itself, Mike finally stopped skating for a few weeks, still running the NGO's skatepark without actively taking part in the sessions. However, without being able to mentor children and youth visiting the NGO, Mike was missing an important source of involvement and respect that had been very helpful to him in this form of social work. When he felt better after a few weeks, he happily ventured back on the board, but only to injure the ligaments in his left foot again when attempting a trick. Deeply frustrated, Mike gave up on skateboarding completely. Moreover, he seemed to conclude in general at that time that he was no longer a young man, but was now entering a new phase of life where he had to conform to the societal expectation of a respectable adult focusing on the 'serious aspects' of

existence, and focus on caring for his girlfriend and preparing to start a family. The NGO was about to fold anyway, also for other reasons, and so Mike left the NGO work, moved with his partner to a house outside of the city and practically vanished from the local skateboarding scene.

Other skateboarders rediscovered skateboarding in a new way after they had outgrown the competitive age. No longer able or willing to meet the challenge standards to compete in the upper ranks of the skateboarding scene's hierarchy, they broke skateboarding down to its practical essence. That they no longer had to prove themselves somehow freed these men from the pressure to perform and allowed a more gentle handling of their bodies, instead of sacrificing them to prove themselves in the eyes of other boys and men. The befriended skaters Ayusch and Corbin were among talented young skaters every day, but had developed a new perspective on the sport as they grew older:

Ayusch: Already when I started skating I was like, that's not about other people, that's about like me. Trying to just figure out myself. 'Cause the hype skateboarding and that, that's like I think you end up in the shit where you are doing it for other people. You are doing it for yourself, but you are also doing it for other people. Because you are trying to prove a point. And I think that's like eventually it fades away. Then you gotta realise that you are skating for yourself. And you do a lot better, just skateboarding. And also just, you satisfy yourself a lot more, because you are skating for you.

Corbin: Yeah man, like, you know, as you get smarter you get more mature you peel past those layers. And you just get back to the thing that you fell in love with originally, which was just skating. So, I guess that is the main thing. The main part of what you, you gotta keep yourself doing if you want to stick with it. Just the love of skating, just skate because you love skating. It's kinda different for me now.

Once Ayusch and Corbin left the age when they were able to effectively prove their manhood through daring stunts, they recollected the pleasant aspects of the playful practice by freeing it from seriousness and the pressure to conform to the hegemonic tough guy masculinity of youngsters putting their bodies on the line. Older skateboarders could rediscover the truly playful aspect of skateboarding. Proving physical toughness, risk affinity and fear resistance were not so important in this interpretation of skateboarding. The body did not have to be pushed to the limits. In a way, the 'skateboarding elders' were leaving the serious game over masculinity to the 'young guns'. The sport could thus have quite different meanings, qualities and characteristics for different age groups. And there existed different interpretations and expectations regarding the expression of masculine traits according to age. Some ageing skaters could dare to turn to styles that were considered uncool

among younger skaters, such as cruising/longboarding⁹⁷ and vert skateboarding. Vert has the advantage that it is gentler on the body. The movements on a ramp are softer, and there are seldom hard impacts, and the legs and feet tend to be less burdened than with ollies and flip tricks in street. For these reasons it seems to be a good alternative. This aspect was supported by the fact that some vert professionals were able to still ride competitively at an older age, such as Tony Hawk and Dallas Oberholzer. The latter even qualified for the skateboarding Olympics in 2021 being 46 years old⁹⁸.

Veteran skateboarder Arnie Lambert, who had turned 50 shortly after I had initially met him, had also discovered new ways for himself to remain practically involved in street skateboarding contexts, although he couldn't and didn't want to do any more 'gnarly' street tricks and had long passed the zenith of his potential. From time to time he still tried street tricks in skateparks, but stressed how much it strained his body and often preferred to ride for himself (while he had ridden countless demos and contests in his heyday in front of large audiences). Despite him hardly being able to conform to the street skateboarding standards set by younger generations, Arnie could still gain recognition via certain relatively unusual manoeuvres, as he was technically very experienced and could perform freestyle manoeuvres that many younger skateboarders could not perform at all. For example, he was able to pull off almost endless manuals and a hang-ten-manual on the skateboard, an unusual, very difficult and old-fashioned trick in modern skateboarding. His speciality was to spacewalk, balancing the board on its rear-axle while swinging the nose of the skateboard sideways to generate forward momentum, enabling him to travel over hundreds of meters on two wheels without setting a foot on the ground. Very few skaters mastered this trick and even fewer athletes could spacewalk over a longer distance. Yet, Arnie had perfected his technique and proudly told me at a meeting that in his neighbourhood Elsie's Rivier he had spacewalked the entire main street, which was several hundred metres long. He was planning to film the stunt which would enable him contribute to the scenes media discourse with a highly recognised, spectacular manoeuvre even though he was already in his 50s. By committing himself to variations of manual tricks, Lambert had found a way to perform hard-to-do tricks that communicated his extensive

97 This was most clearly and bizarrely manifested in my field research when I visited a 40-something street skater one day who had suffered a stroke. He could no longer speak and was partially paralysed on one side. He had only been discharged from hospital for a few weeks after several months and was cared for by his parents. Shortly after his release from hospital, he had approached skateboarding again, his great passion. It was very hard for him that he had lost much of his street skating skills and had to reacquire step by step his former potential. Yet, he could downhill skateboard rather easily and enjoyed riding the mellow hills in his neighbourhood.

98 Qukula, Qama (08.07.2021): Meet Dallas Oberholzer, the 46-year-old pro South African skater off to Olympics [interview recording], Cape Talk, online-source: <https://www.capetalk.co.za/articles/421380/meet-dallas-oberholzer-the-46-year-old-pro-south-african-skater-representing-sa-at-tokyo-olympics> [accessed: 14.7.2021].

corporeal capital, but was also restricting himself to practices that were forgiving to the body.⁹⁹ Recurrently, I could see other skaters giving him great respect for his board control, which underlined his status as a skate veteran who was also known for his vast knowledge of and unwavering passion for skateboarding. That he was recognised as an authority in skateboarding was underlined by the fact that he acted as a mentor to a number of younger skateboarders.

Moreover, it was especially through passionate, older skateboarders that I became aware that not only body practices, but also archived memories and testimonies of once performed physical practices play a significant role to substantiate skateboarders' subcultural identities and their identities as men in the long-term. Anecdotes, oral and written history, and photographs and videos provide evidence of the physical capital that once existed and the heroic acts once performed. Skateboarding is not specific in any way here compared to other sports and subcultures. However, the subcultural focus on media production in skateboarding culture means that photos and videos are particularly significant and numerous among practitioners. Many skateboarders collected and archived magazines, videos and newspaper articles in which they were portrayed. Most dedicated older skateboarders I met had accumulated a decent portfolio of their own achievements over the years: Photos in private collections and magazines, and cut-out newspaper articles as well as videos on cassettes, DVDs, hard drives and online platforms preserved the ephemeral practice in which they had invested considerable parts of their lives. Some had kept their old skateboard decks and wheels, artefacts evidencing adventures of the past.¹⁰⁰

The production and collection of material evidence can be, in part, viewed as a retirement investment that enables skaters to acquire recognition not only in the present, but also in the future. Such private collections allow to prove past involvement and achievements. Without media and material documentation, on the other hand, the fruits of years of hard work on physical and mental abilities evaporate into vague memories, because the practice itself is highly volatile. Among dedicated skaters, records are therefore often well kept. The loss of historical testimonies can be a heavy blow, as evidence of their subcultural history can be immediately lost with them. Andre 'Arnie' Lambert was a particularly avid collector and archiver of his own skateboarding history. He had turned his house in Elsie's Rivier into a small skateboarding museum and informal art exhibition. I visited Arnie several times during my stay in Cape Town and each time he had a new

99 And yet he suffered occasional injuries, like bruises and abrasions. For he had increasingly turned to downhill riding, which was also gentler on the body, provided one didn't fall. Of course, he stoically endured injuries, but at the same time he could not hide the fact that his body could no longer cope with such injuries so easily.

100 When I was assisting in the move of a former professional skateboarder in Cape Town, the complete trunk of a Mercedes station wagon was filled with old skateboard decks, which the veteran wanted to keep (to the displeasure of his wife). Almost every one of the dozens of decks had memories attached to it or, from the skater's point of view, were rare collectibles of certain boards and motifs.

addition to show me. In doing so, I felt quite honoured, because Arnie didn't let everyone see his collection, but only invited people he expected to see the real value of his treasures. Being an experienced craftsman, he loved to creatively repurpose skateboard equipment and turn old gear into artworks. In his house, he had replaced door hinges with skateboard trucks (a detail most visitors would miss), to flush the toilet one had to press a skateboard deck and the water taps in the bathroom had been replaced with skateboard wheels, the glass table's legs in the living room were made of penny-boards, his bed frame was decorated with decks and on the outside wall of his house he had attached a fake satellite dish which he had built from a metal bowl and an old penny board. In front of his house he stored partially dismantled ramps he was working on. Since he was an experienced carpenter and welder, he also built ramps for himself and for others on the forecourt. Even his toolbox, with which he regularly worked as a contract worker on various construction sites, was built from old skateboard decks. He surrounded himself with objects that immediately revealed to 'insiders' that he was a skate nerd.

Most spectacularly, he had attached a huge model of a skatepark made of styrofoam to the ceiling in his 20m²-bedroom, which took up the entire space. So when one entered the room, a miniature-skatepark hanging upside down on the ceiling immediately caught one's eye. He had designed the styrofoam-skatepark himself, integrating elements from well-known skateparks in other parts of the world, and had carefully shaped the ramps and obstacles of the model by hand. His idea behind the project was that he could dream himself to sleep while lying on his back in his bed and imagining how he would ride his board. As he jokingly explained to me, this was his retirement plan, he moved his skateboarding into the realm of imagination in the long run, as he feared the increasing loss of physical strength. He had accepted that his body could not cope with the practice forever, and thus shifted his passion in the long term from bodily to intellectual and artistic practice. It was no coincidence that in parts of the Cape Town skating scene he had the reputation of being a walking book on skateboarding history and a 'wise man' of skateboarding in and around Cape Town.

Arnie had also carefully preserved his own skateboarding history. During late apartheid, he had been working for the surf and skate shop Surf Centre in Cape Town, and performed demos and rode competitions for the company. At that time, in the 1980s, he was a professional skater in the sense that he earned most of his living from skateboarding related activities, particularly from working in the shop and workshop (he had worked his way up from starting as a ding repairer for surfboards to selling skateboards and ride demos for the shop). Despite being one of the top skateboarders in the country, he had never really been recognised and featured in the skateboarding magazines of the

time. According to Arnie, the cause was that White South Africans controlled the skateboarding media landscape and skaters of colour were systematically excluded.¹⁰¹ Yet, in the course of his career he had collected private photos and a number of newspaper articles in which he appeared, neatly wrapped and filed in transparent foil. He had put some particularly beautiful photos and prestigious reports in picture frames on the wall inside his house. A highlight was a mirror cabinet made of high-quality wood in his living room in which he had engraved well-known skateboarders he had met along the way. Tony Hawk could also be found there whom Arnie had skated with in the early 1990s during a tour Hawk and other American skateboarders did through South Africa. Arnie's house was basically a Museum documenting his skateboarding career, telling of his lifelong passion and his past merits. In this way, Arnie not only preserved his connection to skateboarding for himself and reminisced about the exciting (and arduous times) of his youth and young adulthood in the 1970s and 1980s, but he was also able to claim the recognition of other skaters visiting him many years later and in this way preserved some of his status as a former top skateboarder.

101 It was only decades later that Arnie was recognised in a *Session Magazine* special on the history of skateboarding in South Africa.



Illustration 9: Like many other skaters I met, Arnold Lambert had created a small archive with photos, videos and newspaper articles documenting his skateboarding history. Unlike younger skaters, however, who often maintained largely digital collections, Lambert's archive was primarily analogue.

Arnie impressively demonstrated the high importance of (historical) media footage and artefacts among skateboarders. They are central for skateboarders in their active time to get recognition in the global and local scene. In addition, they act as evidence of former achievements for ‘retired’ skaters, for themselves and their social environment. They thus represent an important resource for gaining and generating recognition even after leaving the competitive sphere.

4.3 The street skateboarders’ approach towards public urban spaces

“But the skater sees things differently. He sees potential wherever he goes. Gaps, ledges, benches flatbars, banks, walls – you name it. All have possibilities, although some turn out as duds on closer inspection: the run up is rough, the landing is rough, the ledge is chipped, the rail is loose, there are security guards, shopowners or interfering fogies who’ll call the police. Thankfully South Africa is a large place with much concrete jungle and for skaters this creates a playground of note.” (blunt 4/4 2000: 29)

Among the various levels that foster male preponderance and substantiate the production of masculinity in street skateboarding, the athletes’ relationship to space plays a critical role. While many works investigating skateboarding illuminate the relevance of physical practices and their media orchestration for the production and expression of gender identity, relatively little attention has been paid to the spaces where skateboarding is performed. As I demonstrate in the following, urban public space and its peculiar characteristics in the context of South Africa play a crucial role for the performance of masculinity, production of male preponderance, and marginalisation of girls and women in skateboarding.

A defining element of street skateboarding is that it is performed in urban public spaces (or publicly accessible private spaces) instead of in spaces specifically designed for it. This aspect distinguishes it from other skateboarding styles where the practice is carried out in more exclusive locations, such as in (private) skateparks and on ramps (vert), on beach promenades (sidewalk surfing) or on less busy roads on the outskirts of the city (downhill). As I depicted in the historical chapter, the development of street skateboarding is therefore often, and rightly so, called a caesura in the history of the sport (cf. Borden 2001: 180ff.), as street skateboarders actively approach a wide variety of architectural spaces (Borden 2001: 54). Street skateboarders make urban public space their place to be, spend much time skateboarding and hanging out ‘outside’ alone or in groups (Phasha 2012: 99).

Street skaters are continuously searching for interesting obstacles and architectural arrangements. During my fieldwork I spent a lot of time with skateboarders in parking lots, parking garages, under highway bridges, on public plazas, at benches and ledges at the side of the road, backyards, commercial and industrial buildings and many other places. From the skaters' point of view, all these architectural spaces were of interest because of the specific obstacles and architectural features found there. The spots provide different challenges and opportunities to perform certain manoeuvres, and interesting backdrops to shoot photos and films.

Interestingly, street skateboarders are rather choosy about potential spots, as the requirements that make certain obstacles and architectural arrangements suitable for skateboarding are quite specific.¹⁰² As a consequence, skaters do seldom find opportunities to exercise at their doorstep, but have to travel urban space in search of skate spots. Therefore, a certain bank, a certain handrail or, for example, a particular staircase can provide a reason to take a longer trip to another part of the city (cf. Snyder 2017: 65f.). Street skateboarding encourages athletes to travel through the city and explore urban space by making them perceive and value city environments through the lens of the sport (cf. Borden 2001: 194f.). This lens is calibrated almost exclusively for the architectural conditions, while societal aspects are secondary. In a sense, it is irrelevant in what kind of area skate spots are located: Whether they are poor or rich, had been categorised as White or Black during apartheid, are public or privatised, skateboarders don't necessarily care, as long as the circumstances don't affect skateability (which makes further aspects come into play, as I will show later in the thesis).

In a way, skateboarding had spatially 'liberated' some of the boys and young men I met. It had made them leave their 'comfort zone', and explore places and spaces they had previously stayed away from or would have not thought to visit otherwise. Consequently, a remarkable effect of skateboarding is that it could broaden one's 'horizon' in a very incidental way by making one go to places. In this respect, skateboarding exhibited similarities to other sports in which natural and built spaces are explored and approached, such as surfing, mountaineering, diving, mountain biking or parkour. For many skateboarders, the exploration and freedom aspect is an attractive element of the sport in itself. Wandile, who was in his early 30s and had experienced a highly sealed off lifestyle in his parents' secure residence during his youth, had chosen to spend a lot of time skateboarding in downtown Johannesburg. He stressed how it was unthinkable for him to lock himself up at home

102 On the one hand, this is a result of the 'fragility' of the skateboard with its small, hard wheels, which requires relatively smooth, flat surfaces. Cobblestones and dirt roads are inaccessible to a skateboard. On the other hand, the performance of recognised tricks requires certain objects with certain shapes and sizes.

despite the tense security situation in South Africa. Skateboarding motivated him to explore the city:

Wandile: I mean I hear the complaints that everybody has, but I am just like ‘move elsewhere!’, because who wants to live like a prisoner, you know what I mean? [...] And that’s what I am saying, no matter what the challenge is, no matter how it is, you have to find yourself outside, interacting with your environment, you know, and finding out what is going on. Because sitting at home and locking yourself in a house is just, it’s not living, you should find another place to live, like, ‘cause that is truly not living.

Skateboarding, in the sense of being anti-thesis to the tendency for retreat from public space in South Africa, could create a feeling of freedom and it could motivate to explore urban public space instead of hiding from it (cf. Phasha 2012: 99). It had the potential to transform city spaces into adventure playgrounds where there was much to discover, experience and learn, as Joel told me:

Joel: Skateboarding empowers you so much, that’s what I mean. So another thing in a way that the city changes, is that like, Joburg is dangerous dude. When you are skateboarding, they can’t touch you, you just zooming through everything [laughing]. Two, if you have a skateboard you can get around and go to places. Three, skateboarding community and culture is so close and together, it’s like, you explore all the time. Just out in the world, living, and seeing what it is, you know. Coming back home with stories, and you are always never that far, because your skateboard makes the world that much smaller.

Ayusch recounted how for him in the beginning street skateboarding was exploring, looking for new spots and obstacles. With a group of skateboarding friends he ventured further and further into parts of early 1990s Johannesburg that he hadn’t experienced before. The collapse of the apartheid regime and the white flight from the Johannesburg CBD, which had gained momentum with the economic crisis in the 1980s (cf. Steinberg/Van Uyl/Bond 1992: 267f.) and had left the old CBD in a semi-regulated state, opened up many freedoms for the skateboarders of that time. And on their missions, the skateboarders would eventually meet other skaters from other parts of Johannesburg doing the same thing, and build connections with them. I heard this narrative from many street skateboarders, and the casual meeting of other skaters at spots and in skateparks was often described as an important mechanism promoting race and class diverse relationships in the scene. Further to the south of the country and about ten years later, Samuel had experienced skateboarding as an act of spatial liberation in Cape Town since engaging in it in the 2000s:

Samuel: That's the thing, you have to be out there. I mean even it's a set of stairs or whatever, still you are pushing around, being out there, you are just cruising, so it's in a sense a freedom thing. This spot, this spot, this spot, dadadadad, so you don't have like a thing where you are stuck in a box the whole day. 'Cause that's the magic of the streets, I always say like, the streets taught me my bru, really. Tar, like on the ground, like street, like everything, and the curbs, a long line of curbs, imagine it was all waxed up, you know. But you also feel it like that, you just imagine, you just think of what you could be doing there, cruising, pop over a brick, whatever, pop over, just cruising.

Not coincidentally, many skaters seemed to know their way around different parts of the city very well and, unlike some other city dwellers, to visit different parts of the city frequently with much self-confidence. Those who practised the sport ambitiously over a longer period of time were inevitably confronted with the necessity of engaging with public spaces of different character.

Since the city is not empty but busy, street skateboarders come into contact with other people on their adventures who are pursuing their own interests. Many skaters develop a self-confident attitude to face the city and its social reality, up to the point that experiencing city life with all its manifold, pleasant, disturbing, fear-inducing, chaotic, weird, funny, interesting, unexpected and at times dangerous phenomena can turn into an appealing element itself. The street is the place where one can bump into all kinds of different people, artefacts and situations, like on a giant stage with an almost endless supply of actors and requisites. Professional skateboarder Yann Horowitz emphasised how for him skateboarding brought him in touch with all kinds of unusual occurrences in cities like Johannesburg:

“When you travel by skateboarding, you always see the back alleys. You are on street level, you are eating off the pavement, or not off the pavement, you know [laughing]. You do end up seeing the underbelly and you learn a lot more about the city being on foot and just rolling. You can't see much from a car-window, you know. I guess I try to keep my phone on me at all times to catch weird things you wouldn't usually see in other cities and Joburg is one of them. It's just really easy to catch funny stuff.”¹⁰³

The adventures in the city bring the athletes into contact with all kinds of people and groups in public space, as Cape Town skateboarder Shuaib Philander aptly put it in the short film ‘Skate City’:

103 Broadley, Matt (05.11.2015): adidas skateboarding presents Yann Horowitz [video], Kingpin Magazine/Vimeo, online-source: <https://kingpinmag.com/videos/latest-clips/adidas-skateboarding-presents-yann-horowitz.html> [accessed: 10.09.2020].

“We are actually in the streets, like we witness things on ground level, from like people that have no homes, to people that is on drugs, people that have corporate meetings happening, we come across all levels.”¹⁰⁴



Illustration 10: The skaters bumped into all kinds of people in public space. Here, Johannesburg skateboarders had engaged in a game of dice with a street artist who happened to pass the skate spot, which interrupted the skating session for quite a while and provided great entertainment. It was just one example of the unexpected situations that could occur during a skateboarding session in urban public space.

104 Kyriakou, Jono (2017): Skate City [video], Vimeo, online-source: <https://vimeo.com/113855987> [accessed: 01.12.2020].

The experiences skateboarders make on their ‘missions’ in the city are thus not only material but also social in nature. The inner-city life was by some informants perceived as positively impacting the skateboarding practice as well. Some street skateboarders regarded learning to deal with the busyness, imperfections and dangers of the city even as beneficial for their skateboarding as the uncertainties of urban space, materially and socially, forces them to develop creativity, flexibility and stress resistance, something skating in private skateparks hardly requires (Peters, 2016, p. 85). Joel felt pushed by the fast-paced city life and traffic which made him skate faster:

Joel: I feel like the city has influenced the way I skateboard, because like the fastness of the city, and I skate as a fast person now. And like, I just skate fast, it just, it just naturally happened. Even when I am going through the cars, I have to go fast. When I am going home, I have to be fast, otherwise I will get hit. Now it’s just natural for me to go fast [laughing]

Interviewer: The city molded you in a way?

Joel: Ya, the city molded me, it shaped me in a way, you know. Like, just don’t waste time, get what you need done [laughing]. Nobody else is waiting for you.

Other skaters, like Simba, simply found it appropriate to skate the city, as in his words “skateboarding is fast, the city life is fast, kinda goes together”. A number of skaters I met argued that it was beneficial to skill development to skate the rough architecture of car-centred cities instead of exercising in high-quality skateparks. The uncertainties of urban space, materially and socially, forces skaters to develop flexibility and skill, whereas skating private skateparks was, according to some skateboarders, spoiling younger generations due to the flawlessness of the architecture and the exclusion of urban life. Skating parks was often not regarded the ‘real thing’, not the ‘authentic’ street skating performed by athletes who had learned to handle the uncertainties, imperfections and challenges of the real world (cf. Borden 2001: 90).¹⁰⁵ In comparison, the regulated environment of commercial skateparks could be perceived as outright boring because nothing unforeseen could happen. Regarding these aspects, I had a revealing experience with a group of street skateboarders from Johannesburg that I had invited to join me to skate a street park of a Christian NGO in the Northern Suburbs of Johannesburg:

¹⁰⁵ This is mirrored in the global street skateboarding media where very rarely tricks performed in skateparks are covered. The vast majority of photos and videos depicts manoeuvres performed in urban public spaces. Media produced in skateparks does not generate the same amount of recognition as media produced ‘in the wild’.

Today I met my street skating friends again at Library Gardens in Jozi, a small session was under way when I arrived around 11 am. Some of the guys were already skating since the morning hours. It was pretty quiet in the city today, Sunday. With GL, Corbin, Ayusch and Simba I had planned to ‘mission’ to the Christian skatepark in the north, so I was fetching them with my car. None of the dedicated street skaters would go there usually, as it was hard to reach without having a car or motorbike available, and they were keen to skate the city most of the time anyway.

The skatepark was on the premises of an evangelical church with an adjacent private school, we were skeptically examined by the security guard controlling the gate before let in. The whole suburb and the premises of the church were very clean, lush, the buildings were well-maintained, a harsh contrast to the realities of downtown Johannesburg. Kids skating the park were dropped-off by their parents in shiny cars, their equipment and clothes were fresh. This was White South African middle class territory.

We paid the R30 entrance fee, I paid for Simba who couldn’t afford it, and the security let us in. It was not allowed to smoke or drink in the ‘family-friendly’ park what Corbin and GL annoyed as they liked to smoke and have a beer during weekend-sessions, and had to leave the park now and then for that reason. We put our belongings together on the side and had a little chat before we started to explore the park on our boards. Ayusch said he felt as being in the wrong place, he was intimidated by the visible affluence of the space and its visitors. Corbin didn’t like the aesthetic and vibe of the space. It was too green (too many broadleaf tress for Corbin’s taste), too tidy and lifeless in his eyes. And GL and Simba agreed, it almost felt like being in some kind of playground as Jozi’s busy social life was completely absent here. Even among the skaters in the park there was hardly interaction.

The street skaters did enjoy skating the high-quality facility for a while, although as they were street skaters they could not use the full potential of the park that featured much transition of different shapes and sizes. Ayusch was enjoying trying some lip tricks on a quarter as he didn’t have the opportunity often to skate tranny. But Corbin had a harder time finding interesting obstacles for his street tricks and got bored quickly. After having skated for about two hours, we decided to leave and use the remaining sunlight to skate and hang out at Library Gardens, a skate spot in the inner city. The skaters preferred to be ‘outside’, they did not want to skate in a privatised, confined space shielded off from the city’s urban public life.

As this episode illustrates, for dedicated street skateboarders skateparks are not necessarily worthy substitutes for urban public space, materially and socially. Many skaters appreciate the richness of city life, and the adventurous feeling when skating through canyons formed by high-rise buildings, zipping past traffic jams and ride slalom around pedestrians (cf. Phasha 2012: 99). Highly regulated environments like commercial and private skateparks form the anti-thesis to the freedom aspect of street skateboarding. Some of the experienced street skaters I met, like Samuel, even complained

about the rising number of skateparks which they regarded as leading to a ‘spoiling’ of skaters, and a degradation of skate skills in the scene:

Samuel: Everything is smooth and everything is nice [in skateparks], this is spoiling the kids. If you are skating in front of a government building, it’s rugged, it’s sketchy, it’s people around it, security will come just now, its got THAT feeling to it. Like a little fucking get it, get it, get it, go, we are not supposed to be here, fuck! [laughing] Jump the fence!

A ‘real street skateboarder’, in other words, would approach urban public space as it is, would not shy away from potential conflicts with other users (particularly when it comes to security and police forces) and would handle the awaiting challenges (cf. Abulhawa 2020: 68). This does not imply that street skaters never ride in skateparks: To the contrary, skateparks are ideal training grounds to improve one’s abilities. But the ‘real’ and appreciated skateboarding does not take place there. Skills trained and honed in parks have to be taken to obstacles in urban public space. Not only do the material conditions provide a canvas for artistic-sporting practice, but city life provides interesting interactions, entertainment and exciting challenges.

4.3.1 Between rebelliousness and conformism: the street skateboarders’ approach towards urban public spaces

Fundamentally, street skateboarding carries a rebellious core, is latently intrusive and provokes conflicts because it is a practice necessitating the transgression of manifold norms regarding the use of urban (public) space and requiring to interfere with other people’s interest in those spaces. Depending on context, skateboarders can disturb or at least irritate norms and rhythms of urban public life. It can be considered inappropriate by other users, especially if it has tangible, practical consequences. The well-known skateboard academic Iain Borden argued that skaters exert a performative critique of the relations of power and domination that permeate urban space in western cities (Borden 2001: 210). According to Borden (2001: 233f., 238), skaters contradict the comprehensive commercialisation of urban spaces in capitalist societies by making use of space with an activity that does not produce economic value and even hinders production processes (cf. Rawlinson/Guaralda 2011: 21). From this perspective, skateboarders express a performative critique of capitalist urban space resulting in conflict. There is some truth in this argument as most modern cities formed as a result of capitalist accumulation processes, and due to the concentration of means of production and workers in locations that were lucrative due to location or available resources

(Harvey 2001: 80ff.; Merrifield 2006: 81ff.; Stevenson 2003: 7, 15f.). On the other hand, one could ask how skateboarding differs in this respect from other activities that are not directly economically productive, such as various forms of socialising and play. Moreover, even those seemingly unproductive activities can be quite productive in that they contribute to the regeneration of the labour force (cf. Marx 2011: 526). As an activity requiring the consumption of products, skateboarding is also directly economically productive, except that it may stand in conflict with other economic activities. Borden's argument about skateboarders performing an inherent critique of capitalism is therefore somehow inflated as skateboarders themselves are entangled more or less directly in capitalist economies, with amateur and professional skateboarders generating economic value by capturing performances in urban space on photo and video that are then sold to commercial companies as marketing material (Dinces 2011: 1527).

Rather, it is primarily the lapidary damages and inconveniences caused that put skateboarders in conflict with other users of urban space (cf. Shaw 2009: 4; Snyder 2017: 206). The skateboarder's practice is often perceived as unusual, irritating and provocative by passers-by. Skateboarders throwing themselves down stairs, spending hours jumping on particular ledges and handrails, or performing countless flips on flat ground, all while recurrently falling, is sometimes hardly conceivable uninitiated majority. Repeatedly I experienced situations in which skateboarders performed tricks in certain spaces and passers-by stopped in puzzlement, walked on in irritation or even took a wider circle around these unusual city athletes. Others, especially children, teenagers and young adults, were sometimes fascinated by the athletes' unusual physical exercises, stopped and watched for a while until they continued their journey, or expressed admiration. In public space, skateboarding is always a latently controversial spectacle and performance causing manifold reactions of the surrounding. For example, street skateboarders performing slides, grinds and flip tricks on the stairs and plaza in front of the main entrance to the National Library in Johannesburg caused irritation for some library goers and workers who had to dodge and evade the skateboarders performing their tricks when leaving or entering the building. Occasionally, it came to collisions and close calls with library goers and other passers-by. For some of the skateboarders skating the spot, it was not surprising that the management of the library introduced measures to keep the skateboarders at bay for this reason.¹⁰⁶ In 2017, the skateboarders were physically banned when the

106 Additionally, a small number of the skaters had misbehaved in various ways: They had excessively consumed cannabis and alcohol, had littered the plaza in front of the library building and urinated in various corners around the building. A sign informing about the ban of skateboarding was vandalised. The conflict between the library and the skaters had a longer history, but some of the skaters were not willing to compromise and so in the end they lost their spot.

city erected a fence around the main entrance, keeping the skateboarders from visiting their spot: A heavy loss for the local scene, but it did calm down the situation in front of the library visibly. But not only inconveniences for other users resulting directly from the activity bring about sanctions and regulation. Skateboarders can not help but leaving physical marks in the spaces and on the obstacles they use (cf. Borden 2001: 208f.). While skaters leave hardly any traces behind when just riding and performing flip tricks on flat ground in open spaces, other characteristic practices of street skateboarders cause stains and damages in the architectural environment. On the one hand, skateboarding ‘contaminates’ the environment through abrasion. Mainly slides and grinds are responsible for this as the skateboard’s wheels leave abrasion marks of accumulated dirt and polyurethane on surfaces. Trucks and decks scratch surfaces through grinds and slides. Grinds on ledges and walls have a particularly damaging effect on the structural substance. Because the contact surface in these tricks are the metal axles, they cause not only scratches, but also increased wear on the edges of obstacles made of stone, concrete, marble or wood. Skateboarders apply wax to surfaces to increase their slipperiness, reducing the loss of speed when performing slides on them. Not only does the wax layer contaminate the aesthetics when mixed with dirt, it can also leave a sticky mass on the clothing of people who unknowingly sit on it. This is why skate spots can often be visually recognised by the traces of abrasion, scratches and wax that street skaters leave behind on ledges, benches, stairs, banks, handrails and other obstacles. Among the skaters I got to know it was uncommon to take care of damages and stains they caused. Despite the material damages skaters cause, they usually externalise the repair and cleaning costs by leaving them to the state and private owners of infrastructure.¹⁰⁷ Traces left behind by skateboarders are certainly a major reason why the activity is not welcome and regulated in some areas of urban space, especially in representative architectural spaces, like around government buildings, business premises and office buildings, religious sites, educational facilities and residential premises. Whereas skaters are often chased away from such spaces, skateboarding is particularly practicable without conflict in places where the architecture maintains no representative value and is not much used by other city dwellers, such as industrial areas, ruins or other purely functional architecture, like substructures of

¹⁰⁷ I got to know skateboarders who were environmentally conscious and took care not to leave any trash behind. After skate sessions, some of them cleaned up the garbage that even others had left behind so that no public offence was caused and the spot remained tidy for a next session. I also met skaters who didn’t skate certain spaces and obstacles because they didn’t want to damage or dirty them. But I never met any skateboarders who would have felt responsible for damage to the architecture or obstacles caused through skateboarding. At some spots this led to the odd circumstance that the skaters themselves ruined the spots’ value over time, as they did not repair any damages to the obstacles. Moreover, younger and poorer skaters in particular would of course often not have been able to pay for certain damages at all. Rather, it seemed to be a matter of course to accept the wear and tear of the architecture used, and to leave it to the state or private owners to fix them.

bridges or drainage canals. In these spaces aesthetic does not necessarily matter and the traces the skateboarders leave behind are not regarded as a problem.

Despite the generally rebellious and masculine character of street skateboarding culture, skaters hold manifold interpretations and valuations of masculinity, and perceptions of acceptable behaviour in urban public space. Put bluntly, there are rebels and there are conformists among the skateboarders regarding the approach towards space, with the majority being somewhere in between this spectrum. Neither are skateboarders the reckless rebels, as they are sometimes stereotyped in the wider society, nor are they harmony-seeking egalitarians, as they are sometimes depicted as by skate NGOs, activists, some skateboarding academics and parts of the skateboarding industry.

A small number of skateboarders feels comfortable in the role of ruthless rebels who make reckless use of urban architecture, regardless of the disturbance to other users and damages to architecture caused. Skateboarding can assume the character of a hit-and-run practice, especially when the skaters enforce their practice against the will of other users of urban space or if they skate spots where it was likely that they would be chased anyway. For some skateboarders causing damage and destruction even seems to emanate its own fascination. The ruthless rebels simply do not accept, similar to graffiti artists and reckless drivers, to be restricted in their individual freedom of expression. Against the interests of other city users, they enforce their practice, impose its consequences on other users and externalise the costs caused by their activities. In busy urban environments there is usually a lot of potential for transgressive behaviour. Breaking conventions in certain spaces and social contexts can include using inappropriate vulgar language, being loud, and eating, drinking, and smoking in places where it is not appreciated. All in all activities not quite unusual for boys and young men socialising in public space. Among some of the skateboarders I got to know, a 'skate-and-destroy'-attitude was valued and celebrated, or even recognised as a fundamental element of skateboarding culture dating back to the early days of the sport:

Michael: Jay Adams, that's what they did, the Z-Boys, they weren't clean-cut surfers, they were the punks with broken teeth and like barefoot down the hill on a surfboard. That is how skateboarding started. You didn't come with your pussy ways on a skateboard, that's not how it was, it was all about drugs, like hardcore drugs and alcohol.

Yet, in Cape Town and Johannesburg it was a tiny number of skate crews and individual skaters, usually male adolescents and young men, who were notorious for transgressive and controversial

behaviour.¹⁰⁸ The majority of skateboarders I met regarded misbehaving skaters as problematic as it fueled negative stereotypes surrounding the sport. They focused on the productive sides of the sport, and regarded causing trouble and excessive drug use as hindering. Simba, a young skater I interviewed in Johannesburg, exemplarily emphasised his view of skateboarding being a peaceful activity. He generally struck me as a particularly responsible skateboarder who cared about being a good role model for children and teenagers:

Simba: In TV skateboarding is displayed like, you have to be a druggie, some crazy artist, but it is actually nothing like that. It's actually about having a good time in a peaceful way on your own.

Quite a number of skaters I met shared a similar perspective and critically opposed the 'skate-and-destroy' approach. Occasionally I heard complaints among skaters that children and young people could be led down the wrong track by skateboarding, or rather by skaters with questionable attitudes. Christian skate-activist Pierre, who saw skateboarding divided in-between a performance-oriented, clean sport and, in his words, a "Thrasher-666-evil-drink beer-skate-or-die"-side, had in fact chosen to close a skatepark he had started in the parking lot of a mall in Cape Town when witnessing the misbehaviour of skaters visiting the park:

Pierre: And with the skatepark that I own in Noordhoek, I actually closed it down temporarily. Just because I saw a downward spiral. Like crazy. And I couldn't control it anymore, so I closed it down until we have a fence, because of the kids. The young kids being influenced by these Thrasher videos, or by these, these, you know, these rebellious older guys. You know, the pros that are absolutely insanely sponsored, doing so well in the industry, but like just are fairly bad influencers. These kids are trying to be like them.

Interviewer: Like Dustin Dollin, Reynolds and these guys [well-known American pro-skaters known for their 'skate-and-destroy' approach] for example?

108 For a tiny number of skateboarders I met during fieldwork, the skate-and-destroy-attitude was extended to other parts of life. Such skateboarders' mentality could move close to a hedonistic no-future- and live-fast-die-young-attitude similar to punk culture. Some skaters with this attitude partied hard, experimented with drugs (such as alcohol, dagga, cocaine, MDMA, magic mushrooms), rode their boards and sometimes even drove cars or motorcycles intoxicated, paid generally little attention to their health and in some cases got on the wrong path. After all, most skaters were just teenagers and young men who tried out different ways of life and social roles, had to deal with life challenges and in some cases broken or dysfunctional families, and challenged social conventions to find identity and freedom. On this journey, some of them were led down problematic paths and the skateboarding scene did certainly provide distraction, but it did not necessarily provide the best environment to offer young men suitable tools to deal with social issues, mental health problems or drug addictions.

Pierre: Exactly, and these kids are trying to be like them, so what do they do at the skatepark? They trash the mall, that is letting us use their land, they go out and beat down the security guards, because the security guards were telling them not to skate in the mall, they disrespect the ramps, because you know, like ‘Thrasher, roar’, you know, the anarchy and the rebelliousness. So they rebel against people that are helping them, they smoke weed at the park. They would store their beer bottles, like the park just turned into a rubbish dump, so I closed it down. Because I just saw this influence. And as I said, like some of the young, young, young ones that were innocent when they arrived, were the main instigators.

While a certain amount of transgression of norms and laws is necessary to engage in street skateboarding, crossing certain boundaries was not accepted by the majority of skaters. This was partly motivated by the moral and ethical values that skaters held. However, it was also in the skaters’ interest to prevent the reproduction of stigmas and to avoid sanctions. If a few skaters cause trouble at a skate spot this can easily cause a general ban of skateboarding there, meaning the entire skateboarding community has to bear the negative consequences. In the worst case, skate spots are made inaccessible or unskateable, for example fenced off or equipped with skate stoppers. Accordingly, the question of appropriate behaviour is the subject of continuous debate in skateboarding. Among my informants there were quite a number of admonishing and critical voices fundamentally rejecting reckless and rebellious behaviour. Often such skaters simply tried to act as good role models without necessarily interfering in the affairs of other skaters. Capetonian skate veteran Arnie Lambert, for example, did simply not skate certain spots, and refrained from practices he regarded as disrespectful and damaging to architecture. “Get of my fucking wall”, Lambert sometimes jokingly proclaimed to underline the typical annoyance skaters caused among homeowners, and alluding to the marketing slogan of clothing brand Vans. As a carpenter working on construction sites regularly, he was well aware of the damages skateboards could cause to different kinds of materials and the general annoyance skateboarders could pose to other city users. Skaters like Lambert want above all to pursue their passion in peace, do not want to cause trouble to others and seek to avoid reproducing circulating negative stereotypes. In my research it became abundantly clear that although there are reckless skaters, they are clearly a minority.

There are quite practical reasons for this as well. Since street skateboarders depend on using public urban space, they also depend on the tolerance of other users of this space. Particularly for skateboarders who repeatedly skate the same spots and parks, maintaining at least superficially friendly relationships with other regular city dwellers in those spaces is a big advantage. In fact, skateboarders who depend on skating the same spots on a regular basis can not thoughtlessly

misbehave without risking a painful restriction of their freedoms. Skaters have to balance on a fine line between rebellion and conformity, and therefore make use of numerous cooperative approaches and strategies to successfully negotiate over the use of public space with other city dwellers (Peters 2016: 131f.). In this regard, the transgressive sides of skateboarding are complemented by social skills promoting cooperation and mutual understanding. Contrasting the circulating stereotype of skaters being troublemakers, there is often an unspoken consensus regarding appropriate behaviour in public among skateboarders, especially at popular skate spots. Skaters occupying spots in groups tend to police each other to prevent the violation of norms that can have negative repercussions (Bradley 2010: 318; Snyder 2017: 61). Deliberate destruction of property, offensive acts against others, offensive language and (excessive) consumption of alcohol are, like a number of other destructive behaviours at times stereotypically associated with skateboarding, usually rejected at skate spots and in skateparks (Bradley 2010: 317; Yochim 2007: 76).

To the contrary, engaging in friendly interactions with other city users in the vicinity, like street vendors, security guards, homeless people, residents, and children and youth roaming the streets, is valued by many skateboarders. Not only is it much more relaxed for the skaters themselves to get along with their social surrounding and avoid getting into trouble, it is also generally beneficial for skaters to build friendly relationships as it creates basic mutual trust and goodwill with other regular users and strangers, and increases the perceived safety in risky urban spaces. I observed numerous forms of cooperation that skaters entered into with other users of urban public space. It could be particularly beneficial to establish at least superficial relationships with other regular users. In Edenvale, Johannesburg, skateboarders built friendly relationships with homeless people living in an abandoned building right next to a skatepark. In this situation perceived as unsafe by informants, both parties had managed to create a form of basic, mutual trust. While the skaters offered their friendly company and occasionally their boards for the homeless to take turns, the latter let the skaters exercise in peace:

Edenvale in Johannesburg is an unusual place. The park, which is on a former asphalt sports field of a nearby school, continuously brought together skateboarders and homeless people. A group of homeless men lived in a crumbling, derelict building right next to the skatepark. A reasonably friendly relationship had developed between some skaters and the homeless. This afternoon I came to the park with Ayusch. The only other people present were five homeless men he did not know, probably between 20 and 40 years old, warming themselves by a fire they fueled with scraps of wood they collected in the surrounding. Although this was an officially designated skatepark, I couldn't get rid of the thought that we were actually guests in the living room of the men occupying the buildings. Ayusch was sceptical, he knew some of the men from seeing, but he did

not know them better and he was worried that we were “outnumbered”. When we were sitting on the side preparing our session, two young men approached us and asked cautiously for a cigarette. I gladly offered them one cigarette each, we smoked together and chatted a bit. It felt like we were checking each other out. One of them asked if he could ride my board a bit and I happily offered it to him. I could see immediately that the young man had skateboarding experience and he told me later that also other skateboarders would sometimes let him ride their boards. It was reassuring that we now knew each other a little better, that the relationship was friendly and that the young men knew some of the other skaters. After we had chatted for a bit the two of them went back to the fire, minding their own business, and Ayusch and I made use of the skatepark. Ayusch seemed more relaxed now, although he later expressed concern that one can never be sure what to expect. This was still Johannesburg, a crime hotspot.

I never heard of any negative incidents between the homeless and the skateboarders in Edenvale during my research. To the contrary, both groups warned each other when spotting approaching police patrols, as they equally faced and feared the risk of harassment by police officers occasionally showing up at the park. They had entered a somehow cooperative relationship that was beneficial for both sides and nurtured a form of basic mutual trust. This was just one of numerous examples of skaters building friendly relationships with people they met at spots or parks. Dealing with the high number of private security guards shielding off architectural spaces of interest demands particularly clever approaches. By establishing friendly relationships with security guards and negotiating a framework of what was allowed and what was not at certain spots, it was still possible for socially skilled skaters to access architecture secured by private security guards. Again in Johannesburg, a group of skaters had befriended a security guard who patrolled the premises of a bank in the old CBD, a spot they were occasionally visiting to shoot photos and videos. The skaters and the guard had agreed on a compromise: they were allowed to perform and film their tricks, in this case even enjoying the protective aura the guard emitted on the site, and the security guard could rest assured that the skaters would not approach certain parts of the premises or cause any other form of inconvenience. In other cases, skaters made use of bribery to win the goodwill of security guards allowing them to perform few tricks in tightly controlled architecture (Phasha, 2012, p. 114).



Illustration 11: The experienced street skateboarder Corbin performs a trick in front of a security guard protecting the premises of an office building. The two had developed a ‘working relationship’ through Corbin’s repeated visits to the spot and had agreed that the skater may only use certain parts of the architecture. If they obeyed the rules, the skaters were even allowed to film their manoeuvres, as here by Kagiso, who had come from Soweto to skateboard in the old CBD of Johannesburg and spontaneously joined Corbin on his ‘mission’.

Other skaters built kind relationships with children, youth and young adults when visiting skate spots and skateparks in impoverished neighbourhoods. Since children and youth in underserved areas can often not afford skateboards and suffer from a general lack of recreational opportunities in their neighbourhoods (Abraham 2017: 118), it is not uncommon for skaters to quickly catch the interest of young residents, who join the urban athletes sitting attentively on the side and asking for a turn. While some skaters regard this as an annoying aspect keeping them from focusing on their sport, others view involving interested bystanders in the activity as helping to boost the accessibility and popularity of the sport, and engage informally in youth development and social work (Peters 2016: 222; Snyder 2017: 60f.). By doing so, skaters indeed facilitate the acceptance in a neighbourhood as they offer an accessible recreational activity and can turn deserted public spaces

into safer play and interaction spaces (Borden 2001: 191; Howell 2008: 485; O'Connor 2016: 34; Peters 2016: 305; Vivoni 2009: 137). In neighbourhoods with high crime rates and gang activity this is of particular value for residents and skaters alike. As Capetonian skater Adan remarked, "a lot of the parents [in certain neighbourhoods] might be gangsters, but they don't necessarily want their kid to do the same thing". From the skaters' perspective, trouble with gang members could be prevented by involving their children in the practice. Therefore, some skaters have become accustomed to bring extra skateboards when skating poor neighbourhoods, enabling kids to spontaneously participate. For others, such informal engagement has led to the foundation of an initiative or NGO providing programs on a regular basis. At the time of the research, numerous existed in Cape Town and Johannesburg. O'Connor called such 'skateboard philanthropy' a global phenomenon that is mirrored in the increasing number of NGOs linking skateboarding workshops and social work (O'Connor, 2016: 37). As Abraham (2017: 10) pointed out, in the South African context it can be observed that such programs are often aimed at counteracting male youth delinquency and violent crime. Skateboarding is thought and applied in these contexts as a sportive tool conveying a peaceful and social youth masculinity that attracts boys and young men from a diversity of social backgrounds to whom traditional sports seem unappealing. For skaters, above described informal engagements were visibly beneficial, as they contributed to the safety of skateboarders visiting spots and parks in neighbourhoods perceived as unsafe. I experienced this recurrently when accompanying street skaters in Cape Town and Johannesburg. The involvement of children and youth contributed to the creation of a peaceful sport, play and interaction space. Furthermore, while the children and youth got an opportunity to skate, they provided the skaters with updates about recent happenings in the area and warned them when trouble was looming.



Illustration 12: Some experienced and socially skilled street skateboarders considered it valuable to build at least loose friendly contacts with locals to be and feel safe in environments with high crime rates. I was recurringly surprised how quickly especially children often gathered around sometimes much older skateboarders, like here around Sisipho when skating a small bowl in Troyville, Johannesburg, and asked if they could join in. Such friendly interactions increased (perceived) safety in neighbourhoods that were regarded as unsafe. They also required to share one's skateboard and turn the individual practice into a form of collective play. I usually surrendered my board to the children in such situations, like to the boy in school uniform waiting for his turn here.

In various ways skaters in Cape Town and Johannesburg entered friendly and sometimes even 'symbiotic' relationships with other users of urban space. It is generally beneficial for skateboarders to establish cooperative relationships of a more or less formal nature with other users of the city. This is both directly beneficial for skaters to gain access to urban space, and to be able to practice in safety in South Africa's risky public spaces. Countering the stereotype of skaters as reckless rebels, street skateboarding involves various socially productive elements and tends to nurture mutual tolerance and peaceful interaction in urban public space. In this sense, South African street skateboarders could be said to exhibit an alternative youth masculinity that values individual self-expression, peaceful interaction and cooperation, and practically opposes hostile, discriminatory

and violent behaviour in urban public space while celebrating largely symbolic acts of rebellion and deviance (Yochim 2007: 47). Part of being a skilled street skateboarder involves social skills to establish at least temporary, kind contacts with other users of the city. In some cases, skaters have been able to contribute to the creation of peaceful play and interaction spaces. With regard to the problematic security situation in public spaces in South Africa, this aspect deserves particular attention.

Skaters are not always able or willing to establish friendly and cooperative relationships with other city dwellers. As they break the norms and conventions, and occasionally the law in urban public space, state and private security services are typical antagonists of skateboarders in all parts of the world. South African skateboarders are no exception. While conflicts with private security can be mostly expected when using certain private infrastructures, the police represents a more unpredictable actor. Especially in South Africa, the police forces were not only regarded as rather untrustworthy by many inhabitants, but they were known to be involved in corruption and crime themselves (Jensen 2008: 120f.; Meth 2009: 859f.; South African Cities Network 2017: 44ff.). Among my skateboarding informants, the police forces were therefore not perceived as increasing their safety, but to the contrary, most skaters regarded the police as a potential threat. This was for tangible reasons, as skaters were recurrently harassed by the police or punished in sometimes harsh ways. Whether and in which cases police officers took action against skaters seemed often quite arbitrary. However, the circulating stigma about skateboarders as troublemakers and cannabis smokers seemed to make them likely targets of police harassment. Both in Cape Town and Johannesburg I heard manifold stories of police officers stopping and searching skateboarders. In Cape Town, the risk of being approached by the police as a skater was increased as skateboarding in public was prohibited with a bylaw introduced in 2007.¹⁰⁹ According to this law, riding a skateboard was only allowed in designated spaces, particularly in skateparks. Some skaters told me about very intimidating experiences with police officers acting on the basis of this law (cf. blunt 1/2 1997: 59). They had been threatened and fined, their boards had been confiscated, some had even ended up in short-term detention and were brought to court. Such cases occurred mainly in affluent neighbourhoods in and near the city center. This did not happen regularly, but often enough to remind skaters to be careful when riding in public space and for the short-lived National Skate Collective in Cape Town to comment on the issue in a position paper:

109 Openbylaws.org.za (28.09.2007): Streets, Public Places and the Prevention of Noise Nuisances [document], Openbylaws.org.za, online-source: <https://openbylaws.org.za/za-cpt/act/by-law/2007/streets-public-places-noise-nuisances/eng/> [accessed: 24.06.2020].

"Run-ins with the police and security guards are common amongst skateboarders. At the least many police will fine you, however many skateboarders have come under attack from police and security guards and have experienced police brutality and abuse of power. Many skateboarders are young and uninformed about the by-law and their rights and the rants and outbursts of skateboarders are often seen on social media forums. No formal action is taken by victims of abuse of brutality as the formal processes are not effectively communicated." (Morgan 2013: 5)

A similar form of regulation of skateboarding through a bylaw did not exist in Johannesburg. Accordingly, police officers in Johannesburg had significantly less leverage over and interest in skaters. There, street skaters came mostly into the police's focus due to annoyance of other city users and the circulating stereotype of skaters being cannabis smokers. Certainly, the sporadic encounters with private security forces and the police play an important role in the rebellious connotation of skateboarding as the athletes practically experience getting into conflict with 'the law' for more or less understandable reasons. As Snyder (2017: 11f.) argued, confrontational encounters with police and security forces are an essential experience uniting skateboarders all over the world.

4.3.2 Challenging and managing crime, violence and fear in Cape Town and Johannesburg

However, compared to the problems caused by violent crime, those caused by the police and private security guard were rather negligible in the South African context. South African skateboarders faced peculiar dangers and risks resulting from the high crime rate that skaters in societies with relatively low crime rates did not have to deal with (to that extent). When I was conducting fieldwork, some areas of Cape Town and Johannesburg were statistically counted among the most dangerous places in the world due to a high number of muggings, car-hijackings, robberies, homicides, assaults and sexual assaults (Van Niekerk et. al. 2015: 1; Pinnock 2016: 4; Reihling 2020: 119; South African Cities Network 2017: 19; Statistics South Africa 2018: 76; Vigneswaran 2014: 472). On closer examination, it became clear that different forms of (violent) crime were unevenly distributed in urban space. Whereas class privileged neighbourhoods were particularly suffering from burglaries and other forms of property related crime (Nyangiwe 2018: 11f.; Lemanski 2004: 105), class marginalised neighbourhoods were also impacted by very high rates of violent contact crime in public space (South African Cities Network 2017: 38f.). After the end of

apartheid, the racialised inequalities regarding the spatial distribution of violence between marginalised and privileged areas had not fundamentally changed.

The very high rates of (organised) violent crime in many class marginalised districts had complex, historically grown causes. In the course of urbanisation in the 20th century, deviant youths and young adults entered the stage, some becoming tsotsis, petty criminals or gangsters mugging and murdering for money (Morrell 1998: 626f.). Fundamentally, the strength of informal economies, under which criminal economies formed a sub sector, was attributable to a reaction to extreme economic exploitation in or exclusion from the formal economy.¹¹⁰ With little chance of earning a decent income in the formal labour market and facing existential poverty, some class marginalised residents, especially young men, engaged in illegal activities or joined gangs¹¹¹ to make ends meet (Jensen 2006: 282f.; Jensen 2010: 81; Reihling 2020: 80; cf. Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation 2009: 8f.; Sulla/Zikhali 2018: xiv; Van Niekerk et. al. 2015: 2). Trading and smuggling drugs and illicit/stolen goods, money laundry, car theft, prostitution, poaching and the minibus taxi industry formed typical illegal economic opportunities in the marginalised neighbourhoods of Cape Town and Johannesburg in the late 2010s (Jensen 2006: 282f.; Samara 2011: 96f.). For many class marginalised men, hustling was an important way of making a living under a lack of choices to make an income and one of the few paths open to them to potentially acquire some wealth (Jensen 2006: 287f.; Reihling 2020: 80f.).

In Cape Town, the drastic problem of gang crime in marginalised neighbourhoods had its origins in the apartheid era. The apartheid-regime had actively driven the escalation of violent crime by not only forcing the oppressed into economic exploitation and despair, it had also subjected them to the repressive violence of the state (Chetty 1992: 216). The state's police and security forces were primarily employed to enforce the apartheid order rather than providing protection to the residents and keeping crime at bay (Crapanzano 1985: 228; Jensen 2008: 126f.; Magubane 1979: 318f.). In addition, the apartheid government had nurtured criminal structures since the 1950s to weaken oppositions groups and movements in marginalised areas (Jensen 2010: 87; Kynoch 2005: 497f.; Robins 2008: 165f.; Samara 2011: 95). The migrant labour system and the forced resettlement of population groups had weakened social networks, and hampered the development of an effective civil society. Vigilante justice groups repeatedly formed against crime, but they could not eliminate

110 Friedrich Engels had already described in detail the connection between extreme economic precariousness, lack of prospects for income generation, and resulting crime and destruction of intra-worker solidarity in his work on the situation of the working class in industrial England (Engels 2017: 149f.; cf. Smith 1996: 34f.).

111 The mythical story about the founding members of the South African Numbers Gang, Nongoloza and Kilikijan, exemplifies this dynamic in the South African context. To escape White exploitation in the mines and a life in poverty of 19th century Johannesburg, the two men decided to make a living through a life of crime instead (Steinberg 2004: 45).

the structural causes of crime and turned into gangs themselves in some contexts. Under the conditions imposed by the apartheid regime, organised and non-organised crime could flourish in marginalised neighbourhoods (Posel 2011: 347f.). Amidst the chaos and violence of the 1980s and in the early 1990s, and the opening up of new economic incentives, when the trade with drugs and unregistered firearms was becoming feasible with the demise of the apartheid regime and the end of international sanctions against South Africa, (organised) crime found particularly highly lucrative business opportunities with highly destructive effects (Jensen 2006: 282; Samara 2011: 95f.). A significant rise of crime could be observed countrywide after transformation, and a significant amplification of gang activities in and around Cape Town could be witnessed (Breetzke et. al. 2014: 2; Lemanski 2004: 103f.). This has been accompanied by a sharp increase in violent crime, as especially in illegal economies such as the drug trade, violence is used as a means of enforcing business interests. As Wacquant (2017: 63ff.) had painted for Chicago's South Side, the illegal drug economy can often be seen as a main driver of the escalation of violence in class marginalised neighbourhoods. Similar dynamics were visible in South Africa, where it was particularly the organised drug trade that fueled brutal, organised forms of violent crime like recurring gang wars in neighbourhoods of the Cape Flats. More than 20 years after the fall of the apartheid regime, it was still the poor urban neighbourhoods that had been classified as Coloured or Black during apartheid which' inhabitants survived in a permanent state of societal crisis due to organised and non-organised crime in their neighbourhoods (Pinnock 2016: 4). As statistical data demonstrates, the number of registered cases of violent contact crime had even further increased between 2014 and 2019 (Statistics South Africa 2020: 17). Despite the particularities of different areas of South African cities regarding the prevalence of violent crime, public space in urban environments was generally perceived as potentially dangerous (Jensen 2008: 63). That a generalised fear of crime in the public sphere had developed among the population was emphasised in a government survey in 2018:

“South Africans feel that violent and property crime is increasing to the extent that the majority of households don't feel safe to walk alone in parks or allow their children to play freely in their neighbourhoods [...]” (Nyangiwe 2018: 9)

The problem of violent crime seemed to be exacerbated by the inefficient police force, which enjoyed little trust among the population, and was largely regarded unreliable or outright corrupt, sometimes assumed or proven of being involved in organised crime itself (Jensen 2008: 120f.;

South African Cities Network 2017: 44ff.). While this problem was somewhat compensated in the class privileged neighbourhoods by the employment of private security companies¹¹² and elaborate security architecture, these options were hardly or not at all available to class marginalised residents. Outside of their homes and secured privatised spaces, people were exposed to fundamentally similar risks in public spaces. Consequently, crime and violence were shaping the daily realities, constituted omnipresent topics of conversation and were recurrently featured in media reports. Friends, acquaintances and informants recounted their own experiences with muggings, robberies, burglaries, hijackings, and witnessing murders or seeing dead bodies lying on the street. It seemed that everybody living for a while in South Africa had witnessed ‘dodgy’ and ‘hectic’ situations (cf. Reihling 2020: 199).

Young men of marginalised race and class positions were overrepresented both among the perpetrators and victims of violent crime. Among the victims of sexualised violence in public spaces, girls, women, gays, lesbians and queers were strongly overrepresented (Jensen 2008: 63; Langa 2020: 66; Maluleke 2018; Masango 2020: 59; Meth 2009: 855f.; Van Niekerk 2015 et. al.: 1). In the mirror of these realities, the statement in the Governance, Public Safety and Justice Survey 2018/2019 that “males in general felt safer walking alone in their neighbourhood than females” (Statistics South Africa 2020: 2) seems plausible.¹¹³ Despite the fact that even among men, only 25% felt safe walking in public at night according to Cronje (2015: 20), restricted movement and exposure to public spaces was an even bigger issue for girls and women¹¹⁴ (Jensen 2008: 63; Masango 2020: 59; Meth 2009: 856). Put bluntly, violence was a highly gendered issue with men playing a central role as perpetrators of violent crime (Cronje 2015: 20; Morrell 2019: 36f.; Reihling 2020: 119; Samara 2011: 93; Van Niekerk et. al. 2015: 1f.; Wentzel et. al. 2011: 15f.).

Particularly shocking about crime in South Africa was its violent nature. Stabbing weapons, like knives, screwdrivers, pangas, machetes, and firearms were often involved in contact crime, sometimes just to threaten, at other times to actually hurt or kill victims. According to the Victims of Crime Survey 2018/2019, knives were used in 62.1% of recorded street robberies nationwide and firearms in 36.7% of these offences (Statistics South Africa 2020: 44). This was reflected among

112 In 2015, more than three times as many private security personnel was employed in South Africa than police officers (Cronje 2015: 21).

113 On the one hand, the higher proportion of men among the victims of violent crime indicates that they were actually more frequently affected by such acts. On the other hand, their overrepresentation was also a result of the fact that men tend to expose themselves to the public more than women, engage in more risky behaviour, are overrepresented as members of groups exercising violence and are therefore to a greater proportion among victims and perpetrators of violent crime.

114 As works from feminist theory, feminist geography and gender studies had illuminated, the restriction of women’s mobility in comparison to men’s freedom of movement is a characteristic of patriarchal power relations in many parts of the world (Fenster 2005: 246). Typical of this is a gender related distinction of space in a female, private sphere and a male, public sphere (cf. Bourdieu 1979: 39).

informants and friends I met during my field research, many had made experiences of being threatened with weapons in muggings, robberies and car-hijackings. In 2017, one skateboarder in my wider circle of acquaintances had been stabbed and murdered. Several informants had been threatened on gunpoint. Some had suffered serious injuries by having been stabbed or shot. A former professional skateboarder and his family living a few blocks from my place of residence in Cape Town had been robbed in front of their house on gunpoint. Even in rather ‘quiet’ neighbourhoods, severe forms of violent crime occurred now and then, especially at night. Others had not been victims of violence themselves, but had witnessed fights and shoot-outs on the streets. Although Cape Town and Johannesburg slightly differed in the way violent crime manifested itself in public space, inhabitants of both cities suffered from similar effects. Urban public space in South Africa was per se perceived as risky, and various forms of crime and violent crime could potentially be encountered everywhere. The crime problem therefore burdened all South Africans, albeit to varying degrees depending on their position in the patriarchal, racialised class society, and required all residents to find ways of dealing with the resulting risks, fears and anxieties (Masango 2020: 60; Morgan 2020: 64f.). Compared to cities with much lower crime and murder rates, life could feel strenuous. An unpleasant mental tension resulting from diffuse anxiety burdened many South Africans and permeated public social life. It drew energy to be constantly on guard and to use various strategies to minimise risks in all kinds of daily activities.¹¹⁵

It was therefore understandable that many South Africans regulated their exposure to public space carefully. Those who could afford it tended to stay away from it and moved through public space in vehicles, more or less shielded and protected (cf. Morgan 2020: 64f.). The majority of class privileged South Africans travelled between privatised, sealed-off ‘islands of security’, traversing large parts of public space pragmatically shielded from the potential for social interaction with other city dwellers. Fortress-like mansions and gated community complexes, and countless malls offering secured, quasi-public, commercialised spaces were strong material expressions of this trend: An architecture of fear and exclusion (Breetzke et. al. 2014: 6; cf. Lemanski 2004: 105f.; Mbembe/Dlamini/Khunou 2008: 242; Raidoo 2020: 138; Soja 2010: 43). The retreat into the private

¹¹⁵ In this respect, the experiences of South Africans who had spent longer periods abroad and were able to compare the life circumstances the respective countries to South Africa were particularly revealing. For example, a musician from Cape Town, who travelled back and forth between South Africa and the Netherlands, told me that his daily life and opportunities to express his identity were very different in the two countries because of the different crime situation in both countries. In Cape Town he felt that he had to express a tough guy habitus and suppress his feminine sides in public. Life in the Netherlands felt liberating to him as he was able to express his full personality and felt generally safer. Another Capetonian who had grown up in Mitchell’s Plain but was living in Netherlands was explaining to me, how deeply it had impacted him psychologically to deal with the omnipresent fear in his home town, and what a relieving experience it had been for him to enjoy life in safe Dutch cities. It was only after he had travelled to the Netherlands that he had realised how negatively violent crime and omnipresent fear had affected his life in South Africa.

sphere was, however, also evident in the class marginalised districts, where it was not so much buildings tightly secured by expensive architectural and technological measures, but rather the interiors of simple houses and backyards where residents socialised, relaxed and did business protected from the dangers and risks encountered in urban public space (Jensen 2006: 276f.).

Yet, retreating from urban public space is not an option for dedicated street skaters, who depend on accessing public space and deliberately approach it. By doing so, skaters have to tackle the challenges described earlier and have to become confident risk managers. The skaters I accompanied in public space employed different strategies to minimise risks and dangers, similar to other heavy users of urban public space. All groups that spend a lot of time in crime-ridden public spaces, whether for example car guards, taxi and delivery drivers, street vendors, beggars and prostitutes, depend on strategies to sojourn urban public space rather safely. Earlier, I pointed out how some street skaters were quite successful in establishing friendly, cooperative relationships with other city dwellers. Building basic trust and forms of cooperation with other city dwellers are certainly very important resources for increasing one's own security and extending one's opportunities. In the following, I will go into more detail about other approaches and dynamics that allowed skaters to move through urban public space in relative safety.

Generally fundamental for every street skateboarder is to develop familiarity with the city's society and informed awareness about the happenings in the surrounding during the time spent in public urban space. Surviving in crime-ridden spaces requires first and foremost to be able to read the playfield and the players, to understand 'what is going on' and make the right decisions in time to keep risks at bay. Skateboarders skating the city have to experience the city, observe its social life, learn from it and adapt to the conditions. Naivety and carelessness are sure tickets to disaster in risky urban spaces. Being informed, awake and alert were accordingly emphasised as fundamental abilities by many skaters, like Robert:

Interviewer: I mean town is like kinda dodgy, do you have like any strategies like how you try to be safe?

Robert: Ya, dawg, yeah. It depends. I just, if you are not watching your back and shit, bra, like someone is gonna check. Like you always have to be watching, 'cause there is, like people watch you there bra. Like when I used to study, it was crazy dude, I was going to the McDonald's, like every day by Ghandi Square. And then I stopped going for like a week or two, and then I came back. And like a lot of dudes like sketchy hobos there and stuff, they were like 'Hey, we haven't seen you for a while!'

Interviewer: Oh.

Robert: Like, so if you don't watch yourself, bra, like, ya, dude, people take advantage bra, like for sure.

Interviewer: I see.

Robert: Something will happen to you bra.

Simba was living in Yeoville, Johannesburg, when I last met him in 2018, and he was volunteering for a skateboard-NGO in a tough section of Hillbrow. As a dedicated street skater, he spent a lot of time skating in public spaces and used his board daily as a means of transport in the city centre. With his statement he exposed the harsh realities in particularly crime-ridden areas and how he tried to deal with the looming dangers in Johannesburg's inner city. Also for him, it was vital to be constantly aware. As a local skating and walking the old CBD on a daily basis, he pretty much knew what he was talking about:

Interviewer: Regarding crime and muggings, I mean you also have to deal with that probably when you are in town.

Simba: Oh ya!

Interviewer: So how do you like deal with that?

Simba: Eish, just need to know your city man. You just need to know what you are doing and where you are going, and always keep an eye open.

Interviewer: Ya.

Simba: Don't walk like it's your home or something, always be careful. And also getting in crossfire, just by walking through.

Interviewer: Does that happen occasionally in Jozi?

Simba: No, ya, it does actually, why am I lying, it does actually happen. 'Cause the flat I was staying in, like a month ago the same road, there is no night were you are hearing no gunshot. So every night there must be two or three gunshots, someone must die.

Interviewer: [sighs] Is it like gangs fighting over territory?

Simba: Nah, it's actually people who mug people.

Interviewer: What people?

Simba: Like robbers, they rob people and if you resist then they shoot you.

Interviewer: That's tough stuff.

Simba: Ya. So basically if you are not awake, they will, you are a target. So you need to be safe and keep your eyes open.

As Simba made clear, a detailed knowledge of safe and dangerous locations and street corners in the mirror of brutal violent crime is vital. Especially in the dark, one can otherwise quickly get into serious trouble. The challenges faced differ depending on the character of the respective spaces and the social conditions one encounters there. Occupying and using an obstacle in an industrial area requires and allows different behaviours than being in a public park, on the forecourt of a government building, and in class marginalised or privileged neighbourhoods in Johannesburg or Cape Town. But of course such differentiation is often much more small-scale. In some neighbourhoods, gang-controlled streets can be just a few blocks away from streets that are generally considered safe (cf. Fleming 2011: 14). Situational awareness and a basic understanding of the context in which one finds oneself has to be learned for different areas of the city and certain contexts. Especially skaters who otherwise have had little contact with street life before engaging in street skating have to undergo a learning process, as Corbin explained:

Interviewer: So how, do you have like strategies, how do you manage to stay safe when you skate the city.

Corbin: Ya, you know the city pretty much toughens you up from day one. If you spent a lot of time in it, you start off one way and you just become a bit more able to deal with it, you become a bit tougher, you become a bit streetwise, you can see shit for what it is. At first you might not understand, you see things on like a basic level and on an underworld level. And like there is so many aspects of the city like, you see like social, it's, like there is social like things, social risks, environmental risks, I mean like, [sighs] there is a lot that happens, there is a lot that happens in the city. There is so many like dangers.

In general, there was a widespread perception among locals that a certain body language and behaviour helps to reduce the risk of becoming a crime victim. A number of interviewed skaters stressed that when moving through public space and interacting with strangers a body language and behaviour that communicates confidence, steadfastness and vitality is of particular importance to reduce the risk of becoming a crime victim. As skateboarder Robert put it in an interview, "don't look scared and shit". Reihling aptly captured this attitude in description of survival strategies of young men in public spaces in Cape Town:

“You have to be quick thinking all the time, you have to have the gift of the gab, you know, you have to speak back quickly. And another thing is, if you look away, if your voice becomes timid, you are just showing weakness.” (Reihling 2020: 42)

The challenge of appearing streetwise is to maintain such a self-confident, strong self-presentation precisely when one is insecure, anxious and possibly disoriented, for example, because one is walking or skating in an unfamiliar part of town or gets into an unsettling situation. This reminds of Anderson’s (1999, p. 130) ‘code of the street’, a way of behaving in public clearly communicating a ‘don’t mess with me’-attitude which acts as a defensive strategy in violent urban spaces:

What city dwellers and skateboarders described resembles the ‘code of the street’ that Anderson had observed in his research in class marginalised, Black neighbourhoods in the United States:

“An important part of the code [of the street] is not to allow others to chump you, to let them know that you are ‘about serious business’ and not to be trifled with. The message that you are not a pushover must be sent loud and clearly.” (Anderson 1999: 130)

It is such a ‘cool habitus’ which was understood as a central tool to increase one’s safety in violent city spaces among skaters. This kind of streetwise behaviour can be understood as a strategy of boys and (young) men to gain a respected position in a male hierarchy on the street and aim to overfulfil characteristics regarded as masculine in society to protect themselves from assaults by other boys and men (Anderson 1999: 34). The performance of the ‘street code’ is a masculine performance characterised by the comprehensive hiding of vulnerability and weakness, creating a credible display of strength and confidence in public (Kimmel 2008: 42). In this sense, an important skill of interviewed street skateboarders is the appropriation and display of a recognised (hyper)masculine habitus in public (Anderson 1999: 92). While such a habitus was often already familiar to skaters who had grown up in ‘rough’ neighbourhoods, others had yet to learn it. Since Joel had grown up in a middle class family, had lived for a time in Great Britain, and had turned to downtown Johannesburg through street skateboarding after having moved to the Northern Suburbs with his parents, he had reflected on his observations he had made in the process of learning to skate Johannesburg’s inner city:

Joel: Like, it doesn’t matter who you are, if you look like a target, especially when you stand out even more, it’s even worse, you know. That’s why there is also like a city etiquette. There is a certain way that you should operate when you are in the city. To kinda protect yourself and keep yourself safe. Number 1, if you don’t have the privilege

of a skateboard or some kind of transport, motor transport that isn't a car, get to where you are going and don't stop and look around, and fricking take photos¹¹⁶, none of that, no. You go from A to B, and you don't stop. When somebody says 'Hello, Sir, Sir', nope.

Interviewer: Ya.

Joel: Nope. I am going where I am going. That's something that you learn, like, when you are mugged the first time because you decided to be nice. You decided to give him your time, 'Oh, what's wrong?', and then he fricking puts a knife in your face. Then you learn, ok, get to where you are going. And like walk swiftly, like, just get there, and just make sure you are fricking there, dude. It's like, that is just a certain etiquette that you need to understand, like. And not even to say like, I mean there is a lot of other things in terms of how to operate here, you know. 'Cause it's like, it's not that bad, it's just that people don't understand how the city works, 'cause the city is its own ecosystem, Johannesburg.

A general strategy of street skaters to increase their safety was to keep a spatial distance from other city dwellers to avoid getting into sticky situations in the first place. Skateboards are suitable tools for this in urban space as they give a mobility advantage. When cruising with skateboarders through parts of Johannesburg and Cape Town, I realised myself how the simple act of riding a skateboard seemed to provide me a 'safety-bonus' for several reasons. It felt much safer to ride through the 'concrete jungle' of Johannesburg and in 'dodgy' neighbourhoods of the Cape Flats on a skateboard than to walk through them on foot. Riding a skateboard, I could leave tricky situations quicker and was much less accessible for unwanted approaches. In addition, a skateboard has almost some kind of built-in excuse for not being bothered by strangers. Riding a board, one can always pretend to be busy with the playful activity itself and it is easy to ignore or avoid strangers by rolling in another direction. Joel, regularly skateboarding long distances in Johannesburg's inner city, summed this aspect up beautifully:

Joel: Skate through it all, skate through it all, dude. There was a time when I lost my skateboard and I was walking everywhere, ach, yo, that was [laughing] and I like, I always feel anxious about walking through the streets. And then there was this one time where I went to my home, outside of the city, far away. This was in this other area. And I got mugged at gunpoint outside of my gate. And I was like, I was like 'woah, this is

116 At this point Joel implicitly put forward two arguments. First, it was generally disadvantageous to be considered a tourist or foreigner, as it was associated with ignorance of local conditions and the 'etiquette' of the city. Tourists were popular targets for muggings. Secondly, to shoot photos implied to take a camera or a smartphone into one's hand. Both objects were, especially in the mirror of rampant poverty, quite valuable items and a popular target of muggers. It was generally a common practice to not make valuable objects one was carrying visible in public space in the first place in order not to provide a worthwhile reason for a mugging. Consequently, it was perceived as risky to take photos in areas where muggings could be expected.

crazy,' Joburg is crazy, it doesn't matter where you are, it doesn't matter if you are in the city or not. So where I was, was practically in the suburbs. So like, right there, dude, got mugged outside my gate. And this was when, I was far away from the city. And then from there on it was like walking through the city and you hear all these stories, these horror stories in the city, you know. And I think what makes people victims is like they are accessible. [laughing]

Interviewer: For sure.

Joel: You are right here, you are walking past me, walking, emphasis on walking. Snatch. Or like grab you first, stabbing first, or shoot you, who knows what they are gonna do. But like the way you escape all of that BS [bullshit], just by skating through it dude, literally. I just stay on my four wheels, and I, and you are good, you know. If you can do that, you are good. You can just keep pushing.

In a way, riding a skateboard can spawn an almost magical protective shield and this small vehicle allows skateboarders to move through dodgy urban spaces in relative safety. Being in motion with the help of this tool makes it possible to keep distance to other people in the city and to decide for oneself when and with whom one wants to get in touch with.¹¹⁷ In dodgy situations, trained skaters are easily able to outrun antagonists who are on foot. Especially for class marginalised skateboarders and for children and teenagers with no access to other means of transport, skateboards can therefore be a thoroughly important means of enhancing mobility and safety at the same time.

Moreover, the masculine image of street skateboarding can be helpful in occupying a respected social role in male dominated urban public spaces. Although skateboarding is at times regarded as a silly or childish activity in the wider society, the masculinity produced in skateboarding is increasingly recognised in the wider society as the activity enjoys growing recognition as a sport (cf. Wacquant 2004: 27ff.). Athletes such as Jean-Marc Johannes, a professional skateboarder from Athlone, Cape Town, who was frequently celebrated in mainstream media, illustrated how skateboarders receive increasing recognition as (male) athletes.¹¹⁸ Numerous experienced skateboarders told me that they were respected in their neighbourhoods, and that especially boys and young men looked up to them. There was a diffuse social image circulating that attributed strong masculine characteristics to skateboarders, such as willingness to take risks, bravado,

117 The fact that the skateboard is also very compact, light to carry and can be taken anywhere adds to its high flexibility as a transport device when ridden by skilled skateboarders. In contrast to bicycles and scooters, a skateboard is also hard to control and worth relatively little. Therefore, skateboards are not particularly popular targets for muggers which is a relevant factor in crime-ridden environments.

118 Jansen, Michael (11.09.2020): SA Pro skateboarder Jean-Marc Johannes rakes in another international award, Independent Online, online-source: <https://www.iol.co.za/sport/sa-pro-skateboarder-jean-marc-johannes-rakes-in-another-international-award-4c6d5c93-7a76-4296-87dd-f4e41fb665ee> (accessed: 03.02.2021).

instrumentalisation of the body, fearlessness, self-confident rebelliousness and coolness. In rough neighbourhoods, this could have a protective function to some extent. Emphasising the proven physical toughness connected to skateboarding, my Capetonian mentor Arnie explained to me that some gang members in his neighbourhood “won’t hurt you [as a skateboarder] because you can take the pain”. And indeed, my impression was that especially experienced street skateboarders knew very well how to create a protective aura through masculine and streetwise performance. The activity of skateboarding itself can effectively support the performance of a streetwise masculinity and therefore reduce the risk of becoming a victim of assaults by other men.

Besides adapting to the general ‘etiquette’ of urban public spaces, grouping up was probably the most important defence strategy that I witnessed among the street skateboarders. Boys and (young) men who are travelling in groups generally emanate a certain authority in urban public space, which is particularly connected to their potential to exercise collective violence and therefore fight off unwanted approaches. The skateboarders do not distinguish themselves in the safety-in-numbers-approach many other groups of boys and men employ as well (cf. Jensen 2010: 81). It has been found in many variations in the recent history and present of the country, like in the formation of vigilante groups in marginalised neighbourhoods that initially aimed to counter escalating crime, yet turned into gangs themselves, as was the case in District 6 before the forced removals (Steinberg 2004: 115). Alegi, Steinberg and Jensen described how around certain sports, for example football, (young) men more or less strictly formed groups that served partly a protection purpose and could be at a fluid boundary to gangs (Alegi 2004: 82f.; Jensen 2008: 79ff.; Steinberg 2004: 125). What Jensen stated about the male, collective organisation in townships could be applied to dynamics in crime-ridden public spaces in general:

“As young men are associated through violence with particular territories, they become territorial to cope with the violence. Being a member of a group becomes a way of handling the structural uncertainties within township space.” (Jensen 2006: 289)

In a similar sense, gathering in groups was clearly central for South African street skateboarders to be able to pursue their peaceful activity and create temporary play spaces. Being part of a group helped to keep risks and dangers at bay. Skateboarding alone was commonly associated with much higher risks. Many of the serious assaults and acts of violence I was told about had happened when the skateboarders were on their own. Hartmut, who was of German nationality and living in the country since a few years, had to adapt to the South African conditions in this regard:

Hartmut: Well, sometimes you think twice where to go. Or you think twice if you would go there alone. In Germany, I don't know, somewhere behind a train station, in a forest, you can skate alone without worries. I also did this here a couple times, but afterwards I had always asked myself, was this really a good idea?

Accordingly, most skaters preferred to meet up with a handful of skateboarding friends and head out together. This was also the mode in which I spent much time during the field research. The formation of larger groups was practically realised in a more or less organised way. Some skaters formed crews, equivalents of teams in other sports, but these were often relatively ephemeral phenomena and members fluctuated frequently. Crews often emerged from friendship circles of skaters who frequently rode together, who had in some way consolidated their skate gatherings and who presented themselves as a recognisable groups in public and the skate scene. As the friendly relationships between skaters came and went, crews emerged and disintegrated now and again.¹¹⁹ While most crews seemed to be rather short-lived, some crews, such as the Soweto Skate Society in Johannesburg and 20sk8 in Cape Town, remained active for years and achieved quite some public attention.

More relevant for the majority of skaters were loose friendships and spontaneous gatherings in skateparks and at skate spots. At well-frequented skate spots, collectives of skateboarders emerged often spontaneously and situationally. Certain parks and spots were known to be well frequented and therefore visited by skaters because they could count on meeting other skateboarders there. Volatile collectives emerged in such spaces, and they were popular destinations for this reason alone. It was not unusual for smaller groups to also form in such locations who would then spontaneously decide to travel together to other spots of interest together. When grouped up, skateboarders could become a serious collective 'force', especially at popular skate spots and skateparks where at times a couple dozen athletes gathered during a day. Exercising in groups massively increased security against theft, muggings and assaults as skaters would look after each other and each other's belongings. It was also a great advantage to build strength in numbers to defend against violations by private security forces and the police. While one always had to be on guard during skate missions alone or with a small group, one could rather allow oneself to let the soul dangle in larger gatherings. By grouping up, the skateboarders created effective safe spaces¹²⁰

119 The ephemerality of crews is particularly underlined by the fact that there are no traditional crews in the world of skateboarding that can be compared to teams in mainstream sports. Corporate-sponsored skaters could be considered the equivalent of teams in mainstream sports. However, due to the enormous commercial penetration and precarious economics in the skateboard industry, their half-life was also often very short.

120 Some skateboard NGOs saw their task in this sense also in the 'activation' of skateparks. This was usually intended to turn a lifeless skatepark into a lively skateboarding environment through a mentored program for children and

‘on the fly’ in urban space and therefore could change the atmosphere in risky urban spaces profoundly (cf. Jensen 2008: 79ff.).¹²¹ Grouping brought the skaters respect, which not only gave them a certain amount of protection against hostile players in the city, but sometimes also allowed them to get away with a little bit more on their skating missions.¹²² The sound of a dozen rolling skateboards could already create an impressive tonal backdrop underlining the collective arrival of a crew. In the South African context, the in itself individual sport acquired a distinct collective quality due to the pragmatic imperatives brought about by the high crime rate and the unreliable security forces of the state. Those who wanted to practise street skateboarding in public spaces in South African cities practically had to mobilise collectives in one way or the other.

Yet, the skaters’ access to urban public space inevitably had limits. In the mirror of severe and potentially lethal violence, even the best and most considered approaches and strategies offer only limited safety from becoming victim. Even though many skaters tended to throw themselves daringly into the urban arena, they certainly did not act mindlessly. Certain spaces were considered unskateable, even though they certainly offered appealing architectural features. Some potential skate spots were a ‘bust’ because they were tightly secured by private security guards or police officers. This often concerned higher state institutions and buildings of larger corporates. Such spots were often approached only for special occasions and in a ‘hit-and-run’-fashion, for example to quickly shoot a few photos or videos before being chased away by security. Other spaces were perceived as being too risky due to a high crime rate or gang activity in their vicinity. In Cape Town, a remarkable example was a skatepark in Valhalla Park, in the Cape Flats. The skatepark was one of the largest and highest quality skateparks in the city. Designed by a former professional skateboarder, it positively stood out from the numerous badly designed and constructed skateparks in many other neighbourhoods of the Cape Flats. But the neighbourhood where it was located was notorious for a high crime rate and serious gang activity that recurrently escalated into deadly violence. Already during construction, a supervisor had been shot, a social worker in the neighbourhood told me, and gangs used the park’s obstacles as cover in gang wars. When I first visited the park, I immediately noticed several gang graffiti. Only locals, a few skaters who were

youth, which was also thought to generally increase security against violence and crime in the facility and its surroundings.

121 During my fieldwork stay, joining groups of skateboarders was a very important resource in field research. Being on my own I would not have felt safe in many places. Hanging out with groups of skateboarders allowed me, as a foreigner, to spend long periods of time in perceived safety in public spaces. Several times I had directly benefited from the protective effects of grouped up skaters. For example, skateboarders in Johannesburg prevented my rental car from being stolen twice because they had noticed the car thieves and informed me in time when I myself was absorbed in skateboarding or in conversations.

122 I have to add here that the protective effect of the group had limits. In certain contexts and situations numerical superiority was not sufficient to be safe, for example, when attackers would carry weapons or firearms, or appeared in larger number themselves.

familiar with the situation in tough areas of the Cape Flats and those who maintained personal contacts to the few other skaters in the area used the park regularly. Yet, most skateboarders in Cape Town stayed away from Valhalla. Overall, the large skatepark was little used and often considered a wasted investment by skaters residing in other parts of Cape Town. Valhalla Park was a powerful example of how violent crime that got completely out of hand could turn certain neighbourhoods into no-go areas. I will discuss the effects and implications of high crime rates in more detail in the next chapter.

Access to urban spaces was also strongly affected by the time of day. Although some skateboarders were brave enough to be out at night, for example because certain spots were only accessible after dark. But this was not a common practice and seemed a privilege of skateboarders who had access to individual motorised transport to travel relatively safely to skate spots even after sundown.¹²³ The majority of the skateboarders limited their skating to the daytime and planned their way back home so they would not have to travel through the dark. This did not distinguish them from the majority, which also refrained from many activities in public places at night and which, if there was a reason to be outside after sundown, would traverse public space rather quickly and even more carefully than during the day (Marais 2011: 227). As I always had a rental car at my disposal during my field research and aimed to spend as much time as possible with skateboarders, I often drove back home through parts of Cape Town and Johannesburg after dark and experienced the distinctly changing mood in urban public space. The emptiness and silence of the streets, especially during the week, created an eerie atmosphere in dodgy areas of the cities. Encountering dubious individuals, muggers or corrupt police officers at night was, without a doubt, even more frightening than during the day. The time of daylight was therefore all the more valuable. Consequently, quite a few dedicated skaters I got to know were 'missioning out' very early on their skate-days to have as much daytime as possible for a long day on the board. This was especially important for class marginalised skateboarders who relied on public transport or travelled longer distances on their boards, and spent correspondingly long periods in public space. So, contrary to the stereotype of skateboarders being slackers, many dedicated street skaters were actually early birds who tried to get the most out of their days.

In this respect, many street skateboarders were doubtlessly tough, voluntarily exposing themselves to risks that other social groups avoided. But they also set reasonable limits to their movement and sojourn in urban space, and they made informed decisions about where, when and with whom to skate. They were assisted in this by the knowledge circulating in the scene, which they passed on to

¹²³ In fact, many public transport routes did not operate after dark, forcing individuals relying on them to make their way home in time.

each other. Older skateboarders who had gained a lot of experience in the city could play an important role for younger ones. They introduced them not only to the art of sport, but also to the art of skilful movement through public space in South African cities, provided aspiring skaters did not acquire this knowledge in other contexts. In a way, the street skateboarders become familiar with the rhythm of the city, and although they jumble it up in some aspects, they have no choice but to watch, listen and skilfully play along with it. This is because, unlike athletes in other sports, such as football, rugby and cricket, they do not retreat to spaces fenced off from the public, such as training grounds, but depend on access to public urban space as it is given. Because of the challenges and risks, street skateboarding in South Africa, more than in more secure parts of the world, requires skills that are not directly connected to the actual skateboarding.

4.3.3 Performing masculinity in risky urban public spaces

“The street is a place where you have to be on your toes to survive, and those that do are tougher than most. Baptised in the school of hard knocks, they are wary and aware of the muggers, the beggars and the dealers who accost them at every corner and traffic light.” (blunt 1/3 1997: 27)

The pronounced male domination and masculine connotation of street skateboarding was partly caused by practical characteristics of the sport described that made street skateboarding an ideal foundation to acquire and express traits connoted (hyper)masculine, while tending to put girls and women into conflict with gendered social role-expectations. But this is only one piece of the puzzle to explain the extreme male preponderance in South African street skateboarding at the time. The character of the space where street skateboarding was performed, urban public space, and how it was performed in this space, was of particular importance for the fueling of a preponderance of boys and men.

Under the patriarchal social conditions in South Africa, public space was generally dominated by men (Kynoch 2005: 501). This was particularly evident in relation to violence and crime. The street or urban public space had a longer history as the space where violent masculinities were formed and acted out (Morrell 1998: 627), as fear inducing violence in South African cities was almost solely exercised by (young) men (cf. Reihling 2020: 31). The state security forces, the private security industry, gangs and non-organised (violent) crime were all highly male dominated realms (cf. Connell 1987: 126). Moreover, boys and men were statistically overrepresented among the victims

of deadly violence (Reihling 2020:119; Van Niekerk 2015: 2). The threatening dangers and risks the skateboarders encountered on their travels therefore emanated almost exclusively from other (young) men. South Africa was a drastic case where “exchange[s] of violence” (Connell 2005: 102) among boys and men could be witnessed.

I argue that the male skateboarders were joining the everyday competitive exchange between rival groups of men in the city, each pursuing and enforcing different goals and motives, and each having particular interests to make use of certain parts of the city’s space. In this sense, the skateboarders entered and navigated a ‘masculine game’ or ‘violent transaction’ among men played out in urban public space (Connell 2005: 83). On the male dominated playfield, they constituted just another male group (or rather groups) that encountered other collectives of men and competed over access to resources urban public space offered. By challenging and facing the risks posed by other (young) men in the ‘urban jungle’, skaters practically acquired, performed and proved a streetwise masculinity.

Skateboarders did not necessarily deal with risk and dangers in urban public space in a pragmatic fashion, but produced a subcultural, streetwise masculinity through active confrontation with them. Both in conversations with skaters and in media discourse, I encountered heroic (self-)representations related to this aspect. George, who had grown up and learned to skate in Johannesburg, but who was living in a class privileged neighbourhood in Cape Town since a few years, was almost fondly speaking of the tough times he had been through during his street skateboarding days in Johannesburg in the 1990s and 2000s:

George: And the cool thing with Johannesburg for me is always gonna have the best scene, because I came from it. Its industry is all messed up, like, there is no stores and everything is fucked, but the rawness of like street skating there was always what I loved, you know like, just going out and just being in the middle of the most crime-fucked city on earth. But that also meant you could get away with a little bit more, you know what I mean, maybe not get kicked out everywhere or, but it was still a bad thing, you still got kicked out, that’s just the nature of skateboarding.

Interviewer: Ya. Have you had like any trouble like in the streets back then?

George: Yeah. Like, every, I think everyone had something. Even mugged like in our car like going to a spot dudes just like put knives in the windows and stuff, or, I mean, there is lots of stories, everyone has got a story. I have seen fucked up shit there, like, ya, just, just wild city fighting fucking whatever [laughing] I have kinda seen it all I guess, you know.

Heroism was often emphasised in interviews with class privileged skaters who exposed themselves to ‘the street’ at chosen times, but lived their everyday lives in the much less crime-ridden residential areas. For marginalised skaters residing in crime hotspots, navigating the risks and dangers coming with violent crime was rather a constant, exhausting part of their daily lives. For them it was often less something for which they expected recognition, especially not from their closer social environment. In interviews, they often mentioned it only in passing or when I asked them about relevant experiences. I will go into this in more detail in the part on the significance of race and class. In any case, the confident handling of crime and violence in public space seemed to underline the toughness and streetwiseness of the urban athletes.

As mentioned earlier, the collective, space-appropriating behaviour of skaters was at times reminiscent to that of gangs or gang-like collectives (cf. Jensen 2006: 290). Sometimes skaters even spoke of their crews as ‘gangs’ or presented themselves in public referencing gang symbolism, like the Soweto Skate Society in Johannesburg and 20sk8 from Cape Town. Of course the latter’s name and philosophy was a direct reference to the numbers gangs, whose energy and power was to be transferred to skateboarding.¹²⁴ Ideologically, however, the skaters firmly opposed the gangs, whose destructive effects on social life were well known. Members of 20sk8 did not intend to glorify the gangs, but found valuable aspects in gang culture they aimed to combine with skateboarding (cf. Session 47 2012: 20f.). Referencing the gangs also underlined the lived solidarity among skaters through thick and thin as well as for their self-confident appropriation of urban space in groups. Two founding members explained in an interview how the threat of gangs in their neighbourhoods and their firm rejection of the gangs had in turn forced them to organise themselves into a gang-like group for self-protection:

Keagan: So the Coloured gangsters rob a lot of White people and, us skateboarding in the 2000s as like teenagers which was known as a White predominantly sport made us associated with the White man which was then seen as a weakness in our own community. So we were kind of, if we didn’t belong to a gang we were, of course, weaker than any individual within a gang and therefore targeted, ‘cause they could rob us easily, but because we weren’t in a gang and we were skateboarders which was affiliated to the White man we were further seen as easy targets to approach and, you know, take advantage of. [...]

Michael: 26, 27, 28, and 28 is the most feared, you know. And that is why we say 20sk8, because we take our skateboarding and separate, we separate ourselves from the gangsterism.

124 20sk8 (08.06.2015): From Cape Town to the Cape Flats with 20sk8 [video], Youtube, online-source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYVHaKeLCaU> [accessed: 20.11.2020].

Interviewer: Hmm, I see.

Michael: And once we separated ourselves from the gangsterism, we realised we need to be a gang again. You know like, it's a stupid oxymoron.

At the same time the label 20sk8 was a self-confident play on the (racist) stereotyping of Coloured boys and men as criminals and gang members the Coloured skaters had recurrently experienced when skating the city in groups (cf. Reihling 2020: 68). According to the two members, the perception of skateboard crews in public space could be quite comparable to gangs. When they shot scenes for the shortfilm 'Jas Boude'¹²⁵ in downtown Cape Town with a large group of mainly Coloured skateboarders, they experienced hostile reactions from some city residents who regarded the group of skateboarding boys and men as a threat:

Michael: This is not a usual sight in Cape Town, 25 like, if anywhere in Cape Town, if you saw 25 Coloured guys without a skateboard walking together, as a White person you gonna be like 'Oh my fuck, shit is happening, shit is gonna go down'.

Keagan: Ya.

Michael: If I saw, not even as a White person, if I saw, if I was walking to the shop, now 25 Coloured guys was walking towards me I would think, I would probably turn around and walk the other way, 'cause I would know for a fact, 25 Coloured guys don't just come together and walk down the street for no reason.

Interviewer: I see.

Michael: It's like, shit is gonna go down now, like, you only see gangs do that. It is the only time that you see such a big group of Coloured guys together in the street.

125 Jas Boude the Film (01.03.2016): Jas Boude [video], Youtube, online-source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vTCMfNqeTI> [accessed: 10.7.2020].



Illustration 13: Some skate crews, like 20sk8 from Cape Town, played more or less seriously with gang symbolism, which here even included a fake gang sign. The photo was posted on facebook with the title 'gang'. The public self-representation as a gang underlined the collective strength and ability to occupy urban space of male collectives, but was also a reference to life in the Cape Flats and a tongue-in-cheek play on stereotypes about Coloured boys and men (Twenty Skeight (28.05.2018): Gang [photo and text], facebook, online-source: <https://www.facebook.com/twentyseight/photos/1655162601248632> [accessed: 15.11.2021]).

There seem to be obvious similarities between skate crews and other more or less organised groups of men, such as gangs. The common ground between skate crews and gangs is in particular that they can both partly be understood as a collective response of boys and men towards risks of violence and crime in contested urban public spaces. Security and the assertion of interests in public are not necessarily advanced by the use of collective violence, but primarily by the potential to do so. In this sense, the skateboarders' access to space expresses a generalisable male privilege in a patriarchal society. According to Bourdieu, the social position of individuals is expressed in their behaviour and relationship to space. The extent to which people see themselves entitled to occupy space, in which attitude they move in space and to what extent they restrict the opportunities of others is linked to their position in society (Bourdieu 1987: 739). Despite the previously described sympathetic relationships some skaters maintained with other city dwellers, the skaters' access to the space was still latently offensive, expansive, conquering and at times ignorant towards the

intentions, needs and desires of other users. Yochim had emphasised this aspect in her research among street skateboarders in the USA:

“The simple portrayal of skateboarders [in their videos] moving through public and private spaces suggests that they believe they are entitled to dominate these spaces – that they can do whatever they want, wherever they want.” (Yochim 2007: 226)

Just as there were few groups of girls and women in the wider society that controlled parts of public space in a similar way to gangs, other criminal organisations or even private security companies, there were no such female collectives in South African street skateboarding. Girls and women could not easily participate in the ‘male game’ played out in public, as they entered it from a marginalised position in a patriarchal society. As was much debated, there was a pronounced problem of gender-specific violence in South Africa, with girls and women being victims of sexualised violence to a high degree (Reihling 2020: 119; Van Niekerk 2015: 1). Their sojourn in public spaces of a patriarchal society was always accompanied by gender-specific risks boys and young men were not exposed to. And although boys and men were over-represented among the victims of deadly violent crime, their gender identity offered protection from certain forms of violence and assault if they succeeded in presenting a somehow respected masculinity and formed groups in public to stand their ground (cf. Yochim 2007: 222f.). The gender-specific risks in public space contributed structurally and directly to the exclusion of women and girls from street skateboarding (cf. Dupont 2014: 20f.). For these reasons, it is therefore plausible that girls and women were much more likely to be found in other skateboarding styles, particularly those that were practised in commercial skateparks and environments where violent crime and sexualised violence posed no significant problems. This connection had become a stereotype in the local skate scene when I conducted fieldwork. Many of the interviewed skaters closely associated skateboarding girls and women with vert skateboarding and longboarding. Both styles are physically more forgiving and were often practised in privileged areas or privatised spaces, protected from the dangerous phenomena of urban public space. I will come back to the gendered image of longboarding among street skaters later on. Street skateboarding, on the other hand, was predominantly seen as a particular masculine style of skateboarding and was, in fact, extremely male dominated. It provides a platform and occasion to perform masculine connoted traits like hardiness, courage and risk-taking through the sportive practice, but also by approaching potentially dangerous public urban spaces requiring bravery, recklessness, strength, streetwiseness and collective mobilisation (cf. Langa 2020: 14). Thus street

skateboarding, in contrast to other skateboarding styles, was indeed enriched with a further layer of masculinity which built on the latently offensive access to public space, and on the associated willingness and ability to handle conflicts with other, potentially dangerous actors in urban space. This rendered it, at least partly, a proving ground for boys and young men constructing a sportive and streetwise masculine identity through street skateboarding.

4.4 Devalued femininity: sexism, homophobia and structural gender inequalities in South African skateboarding

As I have argued in this chapter, skateboarding culture circulates around a glorified, exaggerated display of masculine connoted traits. In gender binary societies assuming the existence of ideal-typical two genders, men and women are constituted as social categories through distinction from the supposedly opposite other. In male dominated social spaces and social spaces in which masculinity is glorified, a devaluation of femininity can therefore often be observed (Bourdieu 2005: 41; Connell 2005: 43f.). In this section, I turn to forms of sexism, misogyny and homophobia in the male dominated environment of South African skateboarding.

Skateboarding has an international reputation for being a male dominated sport. This seemed to be particularly true in South Africa. A characteristic aspect in my ethnographic research among skaters was that I was most often in the company of boys and men while girls and women were seldom present at skate spots and in public skateparks. Meeting female trick skaters was a rare occurrence, especially in street skateboarding. Skateboarding seemed to be a world completely dominated by boys and men, with only a minuscule number of girls and women getting involved. During my research between 2016 and 2020, I encountered quite different perspectives among skaters (and non-skaters) regarding the reasons for the extremely low number of female skaters in South Africa. I will first look at the media level, as this was particularly influential in the wider society. How skateboarding was depicted in the media played a significant role in shaping the public image of the sport and was often named as a cause of the sport's image as sport of boys and men. Medially, skateboarding appeared largely as a male dominated and masculine sport (cf. Borden 2001: 144ff.). Globally, the visibility of female skaters was already scarce, in South African skate media this was even more so the case as girls and women were largely absent in skateboarding media (Atencio/Beal/Wilson 2009: 4). Only in niche formats produced by NGOs and activists groups that explicitly aimed to promote female skateboarding did women and girls play a more visible role.

Some female skaters fed social media channels with photos and clips, but with little public visibility outside major media platforms. The absence of female role models in skateboarding certainly played a role in shaping skateboarding's perception as a male sport and was often addressed by female skaters I met, as here by Fezile, who was working as a skateboard instructor for an NGO in Johannesburg:

Fezile: And also I think the image is that if you don't see girls skateboarding on TV then what would make you think as a young girl that you can skate? I was growing up and I saw boys skateboarding, so I was like 'ok, cool' and 5 or 6 years older I was like hey, ok, there is boys skateboarding let me go. If a girl never sees another girl skateboarding, you know it makes it really difficult for her to even being interested in, you know. So I think, ya, that also just like there isn't enough other girls skating for girls to be interested in the sport but that goes to what we were saying, like, it's more of like gender roles and all the stuff. Skateboarding is not promoted as a female, all-inclusive sport and that is why you see things so male dominated, ya.

The exclusion of girls and women from media coverage was furthermore complemented by sexist, objectifying portrayals of girls and women in skateboarding media. As I have illuminated in the first chapter, sexism and misogyny had gained particular prominence with the advent of street skateboarding and the glorification of urban tough guy masculinities (Atencio/Beal/Wilson 2009: 7; Borden 2001: 147f.; Borden 2019: 38; Schäfer 2020: 264). Western and especially American skateboarding media had a longer history of objectifying and sexualising women, and largely excluding female athletes from coverage (Abulhawa 2008: 60; Borden 2001: 147; Dupont 2014: 21; Wheaton/Beal 2003: 171). Deck graphics and shirt designs had repeatedly disseminated sexualised images of women. At major skateboarding events, lightly clad ring girls performing in front of an exclusively male roster were not an uncommon sight (Abulhawa 2008: 60ff.). Sexist attitudes had been voiced by a number of prominent professional skateboarders on the international stage. Christian Hosoi, Craig Johnson and Nyjah Huston had, for instance, publicly opposed the participation of women in the sport (Borden 2019: 37). The fact that younger top athletes like Huston did not shy away from voicing such opinions in public demonstrated that machismo and sexism in skateboarding had remained somehow acceptable in the 2010s. Despite an increasing visibility of female and gay athletes in recent decades, street skateboarding's (media) culture was permeated by sexism, misogyny and homophobia throughout its history (Borden 2001: 148; Borden 2019: 38, 148; Dupont 2014: 20).

The South African context was no exception in this regard. Particularly in magazines of the 1990s and 2000s, sexualised, objectifying representations of women had still been a consistent feature. However, this had been toned down significantly in skateboarding media of the 2010s (cf. Thompson 2015: 71ff.). Street skateboarding had become much more ‘serious’ and sportive over time, and controversial aspects of the youth culture were given less space in more recent publications and videos. Still, especially linguistically and symbolically, latent sexism remained a present aspect in parts of the scene. In 2016, for example, the skateboarding crew veg from Johannesburg released a video titled ‘Bitches Luh Dis Shit’¹²⁶ and the Cape Town crew 20sk8 advertised at times with a photo of a lightly dressed woman’s butt leaning on a skateboard deck with the female models’ face not even being visible on the picture. In some larger commercial skateboarding events, like the Ultimate X competition in Cape Town, a women’s section was not included and the only women involved in the event were ring girls.¹²⁷ A gender-stereotypical distinction between active male athletes and passive female bystanders was implicitly emphasised. Very rarely were female skateboarders given a platform in videos, magazines, contests and events. Especially in the event and professional media sphere, skateboarding often appeared as a masculine and male dominated space.

4.4.1 Structural gender inequalities affecting South African skateboarding

In my research, I identified various structural aspects that seemed particularly relevant for the production of gender inequalities in skateboarding. As I will show in the following, the hampered access to public space and mobility, risks of gender-specific (sexualised) violence in public space, economic inequality and the unequal distribution of reproductive work in society played a key role in the exclusion of girls and women.

First and foremost, skateboarders depend on access to urban public space and the ability to move through the city to places of interest. Accordingly, both aspects play a fundamental role in shaping the demography of skateboarding because access to spaces and mobility is unequally distributed in society. As argued in the previous part of this chapter, by claiming space, male skaters enter into conflicts with other male groups. In this ‘patriarchal game’, in which masculinity can be a resource

126 Ve.G Squad (n.d.): #BITCHESLUHDISSHIT Video Premiere 02 April 2016 19:00 George Lea Park Sandton [event announcement], facebook, online-source: <https://m.facebook.com/events/202604623435635> [accessed: 10.7.2018].

127 Palmer, Eric/Mclachlan, Grant (28.02.2017): Ultimate X 2017 Review, LW Mag, online-source: <https://lwmag.co.za/ultimate-x-2017-review> [accessed: 1.07.2021].

in its own right, girls and women can only participate from a marginalised position. Thus, they often cannot claim spaces for themselves in the same way as boys and men do.

Of particular relevance in the South African context, girls and women were confronted with gender-based violence that was a massive problem and much debated issue during my fieldwork stay (cf. Morrell 2019: 36; Reihling 2020: 119). Earlier in the thesis, I provided insights into the risks and dangers that all skateboarders had to face in public spaces. In the spectrum of violence on the street, female skaters potentially had to cope with forms of (sexualised) violence from which boys and men were spared. Cases of sexual abuse, rape and murder of girls and young women were a recurring phenomenon that caused much pain, fear and anger among residents. These cases drastically revealed the patriarchal order and violence which, even though sexualised violence also affected boys and men at times, created a threatening climate particularly for girls and women in public space (cf. Connell 2005: 83ff.). Fezile had noticed this aspect through his work:

Fezile: And it's also about the spaces where skateboarding is happening. You get guys in an abandoned building wanting to skate, you get guys like skating there in the library [Library Gardens in Johannesburg], you get them finding all this random, hidden stuff, you know, guys will always explore. But as a girl, it's like, you know, like, the safety issues like, this is a very dodgy area, it is a very unsafe area just by default, just by being here. You know, so I think that also has a lot to [...] do with it. Especially when it comes to the inner city. I just feel the space where skateboarding is happening makes it very difficult for women and girls to go there themselves and engage with the skateboarding.

Skateboarding practised in urban public spaces was thus difficult to access for girls and women. Even getting to a skate spot or skatepark could be fraught with off-putting risks. Female skaters were therefore much more likely to be found in commercial indoor skateparks, and communal sessions organised by NGOs and activists, as many of the risks encountered in public space were excluded in such contexts (cf. Abulhawa 2008: 56). Moreover, girls and young women were not infrequently discouraged from skateboarding by their parents and relatives who, out of concern, tended to introduce them to other, more accessible and less risky activities and sports. For this very reason, girls and women seemed to play hardly any role in street skateboarding, while they were present in other styles, such as vert and longboarding, at least in small numbers. Accordingly, skater Melissa Williams emphasised the importance of accessible skateparks for the promotion of female skateboarding:

“[Interviewer]: Why do you think there are so few female skateboarders in SA?”

[Melissa Williams]: I don’t know, I think maybe it comes down to a lack of role models really. If you don’t see other girls doing it, maybe you’re not inspired as easily yourself to try it, or maybe you don’t even consider it. Probably the lack of safe local parks also has something to do with it. If you look at the other countries where there are lots of women skateboarding, like in America and Europe, they have bigger industries, more parks and have had all that stuff going for them for a lot longer than we have. People say that skateboarding is pretty aggressive and physical and that’s probably why more girls don’t skate, and that may be true, but in my opinion accessibility is a pretty big factor.” (Session 75 2016: 39)

An additional major difficulty for girls and women was access to economic capital. In all social spheres, girls and women were structurally disadvantaged regarding economic income and available economic capital (Van Niekerk et. al. 2015: 2; cf. Connell 2005: 82f.). Especially for female skaters of a marginalised class background this was a major problem. According to Maluleke, in 2015, Black South African households had an annual median expenditure of R9186 (R818 per month) per capita, compared to an annual median expenditure of R100205 (R8350 per month) per capita among White South African households. The median yearly per capita expenditure of households in urban areas was on average R17193 (R1433 per month) (Maluleke 2019: 27f.). Taking gender differences into account, data gathered between 2011 and 2015 showcased the massive economical disadvantage of women in South Africa. This was expressed particularly strongly in the comparison of the disposable income of male headed and female headed households, with the latter having significantly fewer resources available on average. Women without a formal school degree earned on average 54,4% of the income earned by men, and women with high school or tertiary education earned on average 68,2% and 63,1% of their male counterparts. In addition, due to their higher involvement in reproductive and care work, women (and girls) spent on average more capital on household- and family related resources, and less for individual wants including leisure activities (Maluleke 2019: 126; cf. Mosomi 2019). According to some authors, the economic situation of class marginalised women had further deteriorated in recent years as a result of neoliberal reforms (Mtembu 2022: 337).

Skateboarding is not a cheap sport, even if it is sometimes portrayed as such by (western) NGOs and activists. In this respect, street skateboarding is certainly one of the more expensive of all skateboarding styles. According to my calculations in 2017, one year of regular street

skateboarding¹²⁸ required cost about R3850 (about R321 per month)¹²⁹. If one believes the numbers from Maluleke's report, the costs for skateboarding of a single individual constituted almost one fourth of the median per capita expenditure of South African urban households. Relative to the figures for Black households, this was almost 39.22% and for White households only about 3.84% of the average expenditure per capita. This implies that skateboarding was certainly hardly affordable for a large part of the South African population. That the sport was often still thought of as a middle class pastime makes immediate sense from this point of view. Gender related inequalities regarding the distribution of income made skateboarding even less accessible for girls and women. Among middle and upper class households, a lack of capital economic was certainly less of a problem for female skaters. Because even if they tended to have less capital than boys and men available there, it was usually still more than enough to be able to afford equipment for skateboarding.¹³⁰ In poorer households, where the sport was generally hardly affordable, the economic disadvantage of girls and women, on the other hand, had a particularly exclusionary effect. Structurally, this explained the visibly high proportion of class privileged women and girls in skateboarding, and the tiny share of girls and women from poor households. In terms of class, female skateboarding seemed noticeably more exclusive than male skateboarding. Moreover, available economic capital affected not only acquiring the equipment, but also the available free time and the accessibility of spaces. Johannesburg local Thembeke, whom I met in an NGO offering girls-only workshops, emphasised how the interplay of risks in public space and the lack of capital limit the opportunities of girls from low-income families to engage in skateboarding:

128 Depending on the riding style, the longevity of the equipment varies. Simple cruising, for example, does not wear out the equipment as quickly as street skateboarding. The latter causes much more wear and tear of the gear, as the board is used for rough practices and ridden in often rough urban environments. It also plays a role in how well the skaters treat their equipment. Through frequent riding in dirty and wet environments, for example, equipment wears out much quicker than in a neat indoor skatepark. Finally, the time spent actively skateboarding plays a role, for which I have assumed about 10 to 15 hours per week for a dedicated street skateboarder here.

129 For this calculation I assumed that on average a (blank) street skateboard deck (~R600) has to be replaced every 4, wheels (~R500) every 12, trucks (~R600) every 24, skate shoes (~R500) every 6 and bearings (~R250) every 12 months. I have based my calculation on the prices for decent and reasonably priced entry level equipment in 2017. The calculated expenses do not include transportation costs and entrance fees for skateparks and events, which add another considerable expense to the sport. The costs could be partially reduced by purchasing used or particularly cheap equipment. Yet, the costs could also be much higher in practice depending on how often skaters exercise, the style of skateboarding performed, the quality of the equipment used and so on. For some skateboarders a deck would only last a month or even less, bearings could be quickly ruined when ridden in wet conditions and trucks damaged after a few months of grinding on rough concrete obstacles. If a skater was unlucky, a deck could break in a single trick attempt, for instance when landing from a great height. The costs I calculated conservatively could thus quickly double.

130 This seemed to explain why girls and women in skateboarding were mainly found among class privileged sections of the population. They had more capital at their disposal, were often very mobile (with their own car) and could thus specifically seek out those skate spaces that were safe, and were often freed from reproductive work obligations at home when the families employed domestic workers.

Thembeke: So boys will skate in the streets, girls won't skate in the streets because the parks are too far. So if you are taking a child for skateboarding lessons at a park you usually find White, middle class, who can afford the time and the money to do it on the weekend. Whereas low income families or Black families are like 'it's a Saturday, there is no ways I am going to take you to Edenvale, plus I need to find you an instructor, plus a board is what? 800 Rands? Naaa. Just do netball, it's free. You can do that at school.'[laughing]

For girls and women, having disposable capital was a particularly great advantage, because they were especially dependent on access to privatised spaces to escape the gender specific risks in public spaces. Access and transport to commercial skateparks was associated with higher costs than skateboarding in public urban spaces. Conversely, this meant that a large share of girls and women in South Africa was structurally excluded from the sport as they particularly lacked the economic means and other resources to access safe skateboarding spaces. In a racialised class society, women of colour were particularly affected by this.

As according to Bourdieu, time in capitalist societies can be regarded as translated economic capital¹³¹ (Bourdieu 1987: 438ff.), the marginalisation of girls and women in South African skateboarding was furthermore insofar fueled by economic inequality (Bourdieu 1987: 345f.) as girls and women tended to have less free time available than boys and men to partake in a time-consuming activity like skateboarding (cf. Dupont 2014: 15f.; 20f.). In a patriarchal society like South Africa, childcare and reproductive work obligations are most often overtaken by girls and women (Bayton 1989: 132f.; Mtembu 2022: 336). Boys and men, on the other hand, tend to refrain from such work and are less likely pressured by their families or social surrounding to do so (Oosthuizen 2018: 26). Consequently, the latter have more free time available to engage in time-intensive activities like skateboarding. These gender inequalities are well documented by statistical data. According to the General Household Survey from 2018, in the Western Cape 32,5% and in the Gauteng Province 29,8% of all households were female headed (Statistics South Africa 2019: 5). In single-parent households 34,3% of all children lived with their mothers, compared to only 3,6% living with their fathers in the Western Cape (Statistics South Africa 2019: 8). Moreover, the figures imply that men, for various reasons, tended to stay away from reproductive work, particularly from childcare, and were not always able to fulfil their role as fathers (Malose 2020: 37; Mavungu/Thomson De-Boor/Mphaka 2013: 3). Mainly women took responsibility in society for the

131 This is the case because having time means not being subject to the dictates of the world of work, which, apart from precarious lifestyles resulting from involuntary unemployment, requires accumulated economic capital.

upbringing of children and reproductive work, which curtailed their freedoms in other areas of life and placed additional economic burdens on them.

Hence, the gender relations in the wider society had a visible impact on gender relations in skateboarding. This was particularly evident during my fieldwork in Cape Town and Johannesburg where I got to know quite a number of skateboarding parents. Having children complicated subcultural affiliation in manifold ways. Among the skateboarders I spent time with, it was largely up to the (young) women to take care of the children (Casale/Posel/Mosomi 2020). Although the fathers supported the mothers, they invested significantly less time in reproductive work. As childcare and reproductive work were hardly compatible with ambitious skateboarding, the prospect of a deeper immersion in the subculture of skateboarding quickly vanished especially for women. Despite the fact that responsible fathers who took their family commitments seriously often dropped out of the sport for a while or permanently, the societal and subcultural gender structures made it especially hard or even impossible for mothers to stay connected with the sport and subculture. This was clearly mirrored in the skateboarding scene. In fact, I did not meet a single skateboarding mother during my fieldwork, but got to know quite a number of male skateboarders who were in between 25 and 50 years old and had children. Skateboarding and fatherhood were without doubt much more compatible than skateboarding and motherhood due to the different gendered role expectations in society and in the skateboarding scene. Most skateboarding fathers were fortunate in that the mothers took care of the children for the most part or alone (some skaters were absent fathers), and thus covered their backs, or they were wealthy enough to leave a larger part of the reproductive work to domestic workers. It was still certainly a challenge to stay engaged in skateboarding and having children. After all, skateboarding was also a youth culture, which many participants left at a certain age or stage of life. Passionate skaters had to perform a difficult balancing act between obligations to family, work and subculture that did not always work out. Especially for men who saw their most important social connections in skateboarding, committed themselves to a skate-and-destroy-lifestyle and neglected other areas of life, conflicts with their partners and families could quickly develop (cf. Abraham 2017: 122; Connell 2005: 108). Some skaters' relationships seemed to suffer because of their skateboarding, for which some hardly compromised even after having a child. Preventing such conflicts, some skateboarders seemed to have decided, consciously or not, against starting a family and to prioritise a skateboarding lifestyle up until later adulthood.¹³² Others managed to balance skateboarding and family life, and often introduced their kids to skateboarding at an early age.

¹³² Or rather, the connection could be reversed: Childless adults could remain part of the subculture and live out the skateboarding lifestyle into later adulthood because they had the time and resources to do so.

The gender issues surrounding reproductive work and childcare pointed towards the gender inequalities in the wider South African society (Casale/Posel/Mosomi 2020; Mtembu 2022: 336). Societal expectations generally limited women's freedoms to engage in largely unproductive, hedonistic and time-consuming activities such as skateboarding (cf. Bayton 1989: 128f.; Connell 2005: 71). Girls and women had generally less time, economic resources and freedom of movement in urban public spaces. The very small number of female skateboarders, particularly regarding street skateboarding, was therefore partly a result of structural gender inequalities in the general society. These gender inequalities were virtually not debated and the voices of girls and women largely excluded in the male dominated skateboarding scene. Yet, in recent years, gender inequalities and sexism in skateboarding were increasingly challenged by a number of NGOs and activists. Skateboarding, however, still had a long way to go in this respect.

4.4.2 'Skating like a girl': on sexism and double standards

The marginalisation of girls and women, however, was not solely due to structural, but especially to various forms of sexism that female skaters were confronted with. According to the unwritten norms and ideals of skateboarding culture, skateboarders hold meritocratic values, and recognise and appreciate individuals in the skateboarding scene first and foremost according to their skill and their ability to perform recognised tricks in style (cf. Snyder 2017: 58). The social position and identity of individuals in society, for example regarding gender, race, class and sexuality, are supposedly completely irrelevant in skateboarding. The impression that skateboarding is a particularly open and tolerant sport due to its 'meritocratic ethos' was often emphasised by skateboarders I interviewed. This narrative supporting skateboarding's supposed socially integrative effects echoed those in the wider sports world (Besnier/Brownell/Carter 2017: 107, 117). Yet, reality was clearly more complex, the sport not only integrative in its effect, but again involved in the reproduction of social inequalities of the wider society (Besnier/Brownell/Carter 2017: 99-106, 117f.). The 'meritocratic ethos' in skateboarding did not practically rule out discriminatory attitudes referring to gender and sexuality, although it did indeed contribute to the communalisation of predominantly male skaters from sometimes radically different positions.

First and foremost, sexism and homophobia caused skaters to face double standards depending on their gender identity and sexual orientation. Historically, women were often assumed to be physically weaker than men and excluded from sports, nurturing the stereotype of women's physical inferiority (Connell 2005: 54). This stereotype seemed to play a major role for the marginalisation of girls and women in skateboarding (cf. Bradley 2010: 317f.). Many male and female

skateboarders (and non-skateboarders) I spoke with saw gender inequalities rooted in biological differences, with women's bodies being thought as weaker and less robust than men's bodies, and women supposedly lacking the bravery and daringness boys and men could mobilise to excel in the sport (cf. Atencio/Beal/Wilson 2009: 11; Bäckström 2013: 39). At first glance, such gender stereotypes seemed to be confirmed. The generally very low number of girls and women in skateboarding was remarkable. In the few contests in which female skaters participated, often in a separate category, gendered skill differences were usually very apparent. The top performers in South African skateboarding were exclusively male teenagers and (young) men. There was not, at least when I was conducting fieldwork in South Africa, a single woman who could even remotely compete with the male top skateboarders. The saying 'skate like a girl', a known insult among male skaters to tease one another (cf. Abulhawa 2008: 64), was to a certain extent referring to the observable gendered skill differences among skateboarders turned into a stereotype. Often I heard, from boys and girls, men and women as well as skaters and non-skaters, that the central reason for the low number of girls and women in street skateboarding was that they could not or did not want to bear the hard physical strain (cf. Abulhawa 2020: 55). George, for example, argued in this vein:

George: I think it is hard for a girl to skate and not like she is just hanging out for the guys. You know what I mean, like I think that's probably a part of it and then I think there is a, a level of just getting hurt or embarrassed by getting hurt, shit like that, yeah man.

For Samuel, for example, girls and women were generally not willing or able to sacrifice their bodies, and they would therefore stay out of skateboarding:

Samuel: Because the girls that skate they get hurt, my bru. Girls don't think they can skate, because they don't really seal a t-shirt by falling and all that kak. Ya, I mean there are a few girls that skate, but they properly they will stop because they realise you can sack yourself. Might be a little bit more sore than it looks.

Similar lines of thought were echoed by a larger number of skateboarders I talked to during my fieldwork. There was surely some truth to the inherent conflict of femininity and skateboarding as the radical instrumentalisation of the body as described earlier in the thesis stands in conflict to the stereotypically thought traditional role of girls and women who, in the words of Bourdieu, would rather be expected to beautify their bodies and cheer on their men from the side of the playfield,

instead of instrumentalising and damaging their own bodies to participate in a game over male honour and recognition (Bourdieu 2005: 117f.). Skateboarding was subjected to the gender stereotypes that legitimised the marginalisation and exclusion of girls and women in patriarchal society in physically demanding activities and sports, such as football, rugby and cricket, and their promotion in sports that were regarded as less physically challenging and risky. For example, still in the 2010s, netball was considered a popular sport particularly suited for girls and women in South Africa: the game had been explicitly developed as a ‘female derivative’ of basketball in the late 19th century, with rule changes to reduce physical hardship and injury risks in comparison to basketball (Jobling/Barham 1991: 30). As Thembeke and Fezile explained in an interview, the social institutionalisation of gender division in sport played an important role in the reproduction of gendered inequalities, with girls and women being encouraged to engage in physically less demanding sports. Sport education was part of the school system that most children in South Africa went through and in which gendered opportunities fundamentally affected what sports girls and boys would engage in:

Thembeke: One of the sport my daughter is going to participate in is always going to be a girl-centered sport, so it is going to be netball, maybe, if you are lucky and your parents are open minded, basketball, but it’s, it’s sports that are often at school, because parents don’t think the kids can’t participate in a sport unless it’s at the school. [...]

Fezile: Yeah, it’s like girls and boys, like these are the girls

Thembeke: Girls all play netball and swim, boys will play Rugby. And the one sport for everyone I think was tennis.

Fezile: Tennis, yeah.

Thembeke: [...] Like if my kid wants to do sport at school I have to think about which ones she is going to do. Not all of them all available to her [referring to experiences with her daughter]. It’s tennis, it’s netball, and it’s swimming. That’s it. With boys there is a lot more options, there is cricket, there is rugby, there is this, there is this, there is this. And so, what you also find is that when it comes to interests then, outside of the school space, interests also tend to also become very gendered, whereas skateboarding is a very gendered, male sport.

Thembeke had been confronted recurrently with concerned parents who were hesitant to let their daughters participate in the girls-only skateboarding-workshops of the NGO she was mentoring. According to Thembeke and her colleague Fezile, regarding skateboarding as an inappropriate sport for girls and women was particularly widespread among conservative Black South Africans in

Johannesburg. Parents wanted their daughters to participate in the NGO art programme, but refused their participation in skateboarding workshops:

Thembeke: I am Zulu. My sister is very liberal, that is fine. Because my parents are, but you go to the farms and then a lot of times, kids from low incomes, their families are very cultural, or traditional or got very specific gender based rules. [...] And I've spoken to a couple of parents who said 'I love what you are doing, my child can go to the art class but I don't want her to skateboard.

Interviewer: Ok.

Thembeke: You know, and it's like why? It's like she could get hurt, you know, but I think culturally it has a lot to do with it, also here at this hostel, just here [hostel around the corner in Maboneng] There is also some times you can hear it is like skateboarding is not for girls. [...] Initially their parents were like 'is this even a girl sport? We only, We only see boys doing it, girls can't do this!'

The image of skateboarding as an injury prone sport played a central role in its perception as a masculine activity which therefore stood in latent conflict with femininity. The close association with masculinity and male preponderance was accompanied by the belief that the sport was particularly inappropriate for girls and women because they could not develop and apply the necessary skills (Abulhawa 2020: 55). While I heard a similar, stereotyping line of argument quite often, never was I provided a concise explanation of which physical characteristics make street skateboarding harder to execute for girls and women, or in what way female bodies are not able to develop the skills for skateboarding.

The circulating stereotype made it certainly considerably more difficult for girls and women to engage in the sport, as it fed self-doubt and disparaging feedback from the social environment, causing insecurities and demotivation among girls and women interested in the sport. Fezile, for example, elaborated how parental influence often discouraged interested girls from skateboarding who were showing an interest in the skateboarding workshops she was mentoring:

Fezile: So already from home like that gender role assigned to girls is already, is already started before they even get out. It is like at home parents are telling their kids that as girl this is what you are doing, as a boy this is what you do. So which I think makes it really hard for a young girl to come out here, even if they are interested in skateboarding. And you see it a lot, especially when we are at the outreach sessions, you see the girls, you come up with the skateboards and they want to get involved, but they are afraid to come and ask, or they are afraid to like, they'll skate once and then they fall

and then like ‘ah, my parents said it’s for boys, you know, it’s not for girls, you know’ and then they just stop, they give up.

Children are exposed to gender stereotypes at an early age, with girls being taught not to instrumentalise their bodies like tools, whereas boys are often motivated to do so, particularly when it comes to sport (Sobiech 2002: 40). Observations like those of Fezile illustrate that the low number of girls in skateboarding could be linked to discouragement by family and social environment. Many girls seemed to rule out skateboarding as a ‘sport for boys’ as an option from the start. Predominantly a few, namely those who experienced positive feedback from their environment and whose intrinsic motivation was very high, engaged in the seemingly male activity. The girls and women who found their way into skateboarding had to deal with recurring stereotyping and questioning of them. Unlike boys and men, they had to prove recurrently that they occupy a legitimate place in skateboarding. Quite practically, female skaters were often met with a certain scepticism and confronted with the assumption that they would very unlikely be talented skateboarders, and that they did also not seriously dedicate themselves to the practice and lack the skills to ‘truly’ participate in the game over masculinity. Being confronted with disparaging, more or less direct, sexist comments from male skaters was a complaint I heard numerous times from skateboarding girls and women. In a podcast about the skate crew Island Gals, a young, female skateboarder pinpointed the discouraging effect such statements could have:

"I’ve met boys who would be like: I’ll never learn this. I’ll never be able to jump that, I’ll never get that trick, because I am a girl. It had a huge impact on my confidence. There was a time when I actually quit because someone said, I will never land an ollie. So I just quit. I’ll just be walking around campus carrying my board, they’re like: Can you really skate? That’s your boyfriend’s skateboard isn’t it?"¹³³

It seemed unsurprising to me that many girls and women struggled to develop an interest in the sport and, if they were engaged in skateboarding, to sustain motivated engagement in the long term, at least in the context of male dominated spaces. Street skateboarding in particular was a world in which machismo and the accompanying devaluations of femininity, girls and women were almost omnipresent in the media, in professional events, and in skateparks and at skate spots. The low number of female street skaters was thus partly attributable to the fact that, simply put, the sport

133 Business daily (28.07.2022): The women breaking into skateboarding in South Africa [podcast], online-source: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3ct311z> [accessed: 25.01.2023].

was an environment in which girls and women, because of their ascribed or self-identified gender and sex, were made to feel inferior to boys and men, and therefore not welcome in a performance-oriented sport.

For some male skaters, recognising girls and women as equal participants in ‘their’ male sport seemed to be almost out of the question. This could go so far that some male skaters did not recognise girls and women as ‘serious’ and ‘authentic’ skateboarders at all, implying that they were only pretending to have an interest in skateboarding, when actually chasing skateboarding’s trendy and fashionable image (cf. Snyder 2012: 314). This made it particularly difficult for female beginners who, unlike boys and men, were assumed not to be serious about their sport before they could develop advanced skills. Carol, a Capetonian in her early 20s and already an experienced longboarder and skateboarder at the time of the interview, shared her thoughts on the matter:

Carol: I think it has also got to do with the fact that skating has been viewed in the 21st century as like an aesthetic, as an accessory. You know you are cool when you skate. Whereas previously it wasn’t cool, you were an outcast. And a lot of skaters are very true to their roots and don’t like it when people only skate or have a skateboard in hand as an accessory, and they are not actually a skater. And that’s where a lot of the oppression comes from, and sexism. And like hatred from men, they are like, you are a girl, you are just trying to be cool and fit in with the guys, like, with your skateboard. And it’s like, no bro, I actually have been doing this since I was six. [...] And I know that one of the main reasons why the skateboarders frown upon the [female] skateboarders is because skateboarding has been taken on by social media. And it has been turned into something that’s like a Coca Cola ad. You know. You see the blond girl with like high top converse, holding a longboard, you know. So now, like, we have been socially associated with this like fake look, and completely unnatural, and compete facade. And using a skateboard as an accessory. And i think that has a lot to do with it.

Girls and women were thus not only confronted with double standards that required them to provide ‘proof’ of their legitimate presence, but they also had to manoeuvre through circulating gender stereotypes that were constantly threatening to devalue them. This was especially the case in street skateboarding, but less so in other styles I encountered during my research. While street skateboarding appeared in many ways to be particularly male dominated and permeated with sexism, the case was certainly different with other styles of skateboarding. The various styles of skateboarding were laden with different gender attributions. Easy to learn skateboarding styles with low injury risks, like longboarding and sidewalk surfing, tended to be read as more feminine and less masculine than hard to learn styles involving high injury risks, like street skateboarding and downhill longboarding. Flatland longboarding was considered as a more appropriate style for girls

and women as it was less harmful to the body and carried less risk of injury. For former professional skateboarder George, street skateboarding and longboarding were two very different worlds in this regard:

Interviewer: There seems to be a difference between, like if you regard it as skateboarding as well, like longboarding and like compared to trick skateboarding, longboarding seems to have much more girls involved.

George: But it, I don't think they sit in the same thing though, you know what I mean. For me longboarding is more like surfing and like, but like for a girl to have a board hitting the chins and jumping down stairs and breaking your ankle, pretty bad, it's a little like a different story.



Illustration 14: Longboarding had the reputation of being much easier, gentler to the body and much less risky than street skateboarding. Among informants, longboarding was often associated with a high proportion of girls and women athletes. This perception had some truth to it. For example, in a weekly meeting of longboarders on the promenade in Sea Point, Cape Town, which I attended on a regular basis, the ratio of men and women among the riders was often quite balanced. This was a stark contrast to park and street skateboarding.

At the time of my field research, longboarding was certainly trendy, but maintained a rather bad reputation among male street skateboarders. It was seen as an easy to learn, boring and risk-free style, and was perceived as a feminised variation of skateboarding that attracted a lot of women and wannabe-skaters (cf. Schäfer 2020: 123). Girls and women were indeed a very present group among longboarders. Sexism and machismo seemed to be much less pronounced in longboarding, where girls and women could undoubtedly claim a legitimate place. Moreover, longboarding was indeed hardly comparable to the committed subcultural lifestyle in street skateboarding, as it rather existed as a low-threshold leisure practice riders would enjoy occasionally on weekend afternoons. Longboard riders mostly did not spend a comparatively long time practising in public urban spaces, and did usually not endure similar physical ‘ordeals’ and challenges of city life like many street skateboarders. In Cape Town one could often witness larger numbers of longboard riders on Sea Point’s beach promenade exemplifying the stereotype of the casual beginner skaters especially on weekends. Female beginners on longboards represented, in the eyes of some hardcore male street skateboarders, the archetype of the superficial, not truly dedicated athlete (cf. Atencio/Beal/Wilson 2009: 10). The questioning of the authentic participation of girls and women was applied to the whole style of longboarding by some male street skaters. In the words of some male skateboarders, longboarding girls and women were not ‘really skating’, but ‘just riding their boards’. Samuel, for example, referred directly to longboarding when I asked him about female skateboarders in Cape Town, suggesting that the two were closely connected for him, and he made it clear that he did not regard longboarders as ‘real skaters’:

Interviewer: Do you know any other like female skaters in Cape Town?

Samuel: Yeah my bru, what’s that, you see the girls, but they are mostly crews on their longboards, I see a lot of longboard girls.

Interviewer: Ya, me too.

Samuel: Ya, they are not really skaters, they don’t go and hit spots.

An arrogant and aversive attitude of some (core) street skateboarders towards longboarders, which was occasionally complained about by longboard riders, seemed to be based on this perception. Such views were not unique to South African street skateboarding, but they were a common part of (western) street skateboarding culture (cf. Velten 2020: 123). In a conversation, Jake Phelps, famous editor of the legendary magazine Thrasher, and Nyjah Huston, at the time of research counted as

one of the best ‘gnarly’ street skaters worldwide, stated that they don’t regard street skateboarding as suited for women due to the physical hardships and combined this statement with a mocking of longboarding (Abulhawa 2020: 104f.).¹³⁴

The numeric marginalisation of girls and women in skateboarding was certainly not an effect of biological differences, but related to gendered structural inequalities and forms of gender discrimination in the wider society illuminated before (cf. Beal 2013: 102). Various factors made it difficult for girls and women to practice and excel in the sport, contributing to their marginalisation (cf. Morrell 2001a: 18). But it was precisely those socially produced inequalities and injustices that many male skaters in particular were not conscious and aware of. In this context, the previously mentioned ‘meritocratic ethos’ did not necessarily promote equality between male and female skateboarders when combined with the hyper-individual ideology in skateboarding, but was well suited to conceal, legitimise, reproduce and even amplify the existing gender stereotypes and inequalities. By excluding structural inequalities and power relations, and the effects of sexist discrimination from the equation, the athletes were only measured by their individual performance and thus considered to be individually responsible for their achievements (cf. Besnier/Brownell/Carter 2017: 117). As Bourdieu had aptly put it regarding the legitimation of male domination in society, (patriarchal) ideology transforms a social relationship into a seemingly natural one by obscuring the social conditions of production of inequality, and therefore legitimises the gendered power relations that privilege boys and men, and marginalise girls and women (cf. Bourdieu 2005: 160f.; 165). As many skaters did not recognise the structural and systematic aspects disadvantaging girls and women in the wider society and in the skate scene, sexist attitudes could become consolidated by the apparent confirmation of the sexist prejudice in the real world. The marginalisation of women would therefore be attributed to their biologically inherited inability to perform and, conversely, not to a societal process of discrimination in a male dominated environment (cf. Messner 1990: 208, 213). The exclusion of girls and women thus seemed downright justified and without alternative to some male skaters.

134 Pappalardo, Anthony (10.06.2013): Thoughts On Nyjah Huston’s Comment: “Skateboarding Is Not For Girls”, Jenkem Magazine, online-source: <http://www.jenkemmag.com/home/2013/06/10/thoughts-on-nyjah-hustons-comment-skateboarding-is-not-for-girls> [accessed: 20.9.2020].

4.4.3 Gendered double standards and the fragility of skateboarding masculinity

Internationally successful professional female skateboarders, such as Leticia Bufoni and Elissa Steamer, and South African talents like Melissa Williams had clearly refuted the circulating gender stereotypes and proven that women were no less capable of advanced skateboarding than men. What was the situation like for women who, despite the many forms of inequality and discrimination, performed in a way that was worthy of recognition, practically refuting gender stereotypes? Ideally, recognition in skateboarding is largely based on the ‘meritocratic ethos’ mentioned before, in which the performance of athletes is valued in itself and independent of their social position. Potentially, women and girls have thus fundamentally the same opportunities to receive recognition in the skating scene as their male peers. Skaters like Melissa Williams, who had received much recognition and support from the core skateboarding scene in South Africa, exemplified this.

However, the South African skate scene clearly showed gender related double standards that made it difficult for girls and women to find recognition in the male dominated scene. The impression emerged that even when girls and women proved similar skills and the same daredevil attitude as boys and men, appropriated the male-connoted dispositions and successfully participated in the game over masculinity, they could not, in contrast to boys and men, count on being recognised and valued by male skaters. Gender prejudices played a significant role in the valuation of practices. On the one hand, if girls and women rode among male skaters confidently they occasionally had to deal with the issue of masculinisation. By engaging in the masculine game, by turning from passive spectators into active participants and performing the male connoted skateboarding practices, girls and women were not seldom stereotyped as tomboys or lesbians (cf. Abulhawa 2008: 69). The performance of a masculine connoted practice coincided with the deprivation of femininity and the association with masculinised female identities (cf. Bourdieu 2005: 119). The girls and women who were regarded as masculinised, transgressing the ‘traditional’ gender norms in society, were often confronted with a form of devaluation and stigmatisation. Skateboarder Khanyisile told me how she was recurrently confronted with being stereotyped as lesbian or bisexual because she was an advanced beginner skateboarder. This was not only a thoroughly unpleasant stereotyping, especially when it was not true, but unsettling in a country with a very high rate of (sexualised) violence against lesbians. Khanyisile, who was a heterosexual, Black woman from a middle class background, handled such superficial attributions self-confidently and with humour:

Khanyisile: Ya, yes, for your masculine part, if you are a girl and you skate, there is a big question mark, like, are you a girl, are you a boy?

Interviewer: Is it?

Khanyisile: Like, yes!

Interviewer: Have you experienced something like that yourself?

Khanyisile: Ya, 'are you a tomboy, are you into girls'? [laughing] 'Yes, I am totally'

Interviewer: People asked you these questions?

Khanyisile: Yeah. I am, if I am bisexual [laughing] Yes. Am I bisexual? And, obviously with my age, 24, it's more like, you should be, you should be trying to get a husband, you should be, you know, yes.

The stereotype that talented female skaters were lesbians¹³⁵ seemed quite widespread among the skaters I met during my fieldwork. However, as with Khanyisile and many other girls and women in skateboarding, the connection of skateboarding and lesbianism was largely imagined. It seemed to result from the perceived masculinisation, which, in the view of some boys and men, also included the sexual orientation of female skateboarders. Underlying this was also the assumption that women in particular would be attracted to skateboarding, who had a 'masculine side'. Even though the stereotype undoubtedly had little real relevance, it was reflected to some extent. Among the female skaters I met and spoke with, there were actually a remarkable share who described themselves as tomboyish or who were lesbians. For them, it actually seemed easier to reconcile the masculine connotation of the activity and subcultural affiliation with their gender identity. For heterosexual women and girls, conflicts with gender-specific role expectations were, in a way, more likely to occur. Ambitious skateboarding demanded practices that were difficult to reconcile with certain feminine qualities and practices, such as the instrumentalisation of the body for a dangerous activity (rather than optimising it as an object of pleasure) or the deviousness of wearing femininely connoted clothing in skateboarding, such as skirts, jewellery and heeled shoes. So for girls and women who felt comfortable in male-connoted social roles skateboarding did offer a range of

135 During my fieldwork, quite a number of male skateboarders perpetuated the stereotype that skateboarding girls and women were often lesbians. For these boys and men it was unthinkable that a girl or woman could devote herself to a male-connoted activity and still occupy a feminine role in other social contexts. One of my informants in Cape Town had indeed developed a disgust against skateboarding women which seemed to be primarily rooted his homophobic attitude and machismo. He did not like female skateboarders visiting sessions and would generally avoid talking to them, as he found them to be unsettling as skaters and women alike, assuming female skateboarders would most often be lesbians.

identities and opportunities for self-expression. At the same time, this aspect had become a devaluing stereotype among some male skaters assuming skateboarding girls and women tended to be tomboys or lesbians that was not mirrored in reality.

On the other hand, I could witness among male skateboarders a phenomenon that has been described in gender studies with regard to many other areas of society and sports: That the successful participation of women in spheres that were and are male dominated may well be seen by men active in these spheres as a threat to or devaluation of their masculinity and male honour (Bourdieu 2005: 95f.). By proving successful acquisition of skills and attributes regarded masculine, girls and women challenge the patriarchal order that is, at least partly, legitimised by a presumed (physical and psychological) superiority of men over women (Connell 2005: 54). Girls and women outperforming boys and men practically shatter the assumed superiority of boys and men. Some male skaters seemed to have a generally negative attitude towards female skaters for this reason, who in their view should generally not 'interfere' into the male game at all. The exclusion of girls and women could be viewed as a protection mechanism against the 'threat' of participating girls and women to a certain extent, similar to gender segregation in mainstream sports (Connell 2005: 54) and martial arts like stick fighting (Carton/Morrell 2012: 42f.). As Bourdieu aptly put it, boys and men sometimes invest doggedly in the serious games of masculinity precisely when women and girls are involved, for fear of being beaten by a girl or women which is perceived as humiliating and damaging their masculine honour (Bourdieu 2005: 93f.). I could observe similar dynamics in South African skateboarding in a couple instances, even if it was very rare due to the tiny number of female skaters, skateboarding girls and women outperforming boys and men could make the latter feel uncomfortable or embarrassed. Johannesburg skateboarder Thato Moete, for example, explained in a video portrait that one particular challenge was to be confronted with the competitive attitude of male skateboarders who felt under pressure when outperformed by her:

“Thato Moeto: When you start like becoming great, you know, when you get a bit better in your skating, people just somehow want to compete, they just compare themselves to you, and then they are like ‘oh, you are female skater, I am sure if she can do that trick, I can most definitely do it.’ And it’s like, why you wanna compare, it’s just skateboarding, just skate.”¹³⁶

The close link between skateboarding and masculinity, in which the sport functions as a resource for performative proof of the latter, seemed to lead to some boys and men feeling threatened in their

¹³⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8zuVsPHrtU&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR2Cd6oqHosUqmC7pm1-le6UkocajAFsOrT0bq-11YJoZZl8gCZ_8AnH9Y [accessed: 7.9.2020] [video inaccessible on 17.05.2023].

identity as male skaters when women were present. In a sense, as in many other sports, it was regarded a particular disgrace for those male skateboarders to be surpassed by a girl or woman, perceived as damaging to their male honour (cf. Abulhawa 2008: 69). The resulting behaviour of some male skaters, which could range from reservedness and withheld recognition to more or less open rejection, made it difficult for female skaters to ride in skateparks and skate spots with comparable ease as their male peers. Even if girls and women met the masculine standards, they could not necessarily escape stigmatisation in the scene and in the wider society. They remained 'unusual participants' in skateboarding as they contradicted gender stereotypes and questioned the assumed superiority of boys and men in a tough sportive environment. Even though girls and women were potentially accepted as legitimate athletes if they performed well, good performances could equally be the starting point for further forms of othering, discrimination and exclusion. In the male dominated environment, female skateboarders thus had to master a complex social dynamic and various forms of potentially discriminating behaviour in a male dominated environment that added to the structurally based inequalities. Certainly, for a variety of reasons, the world of street skateboarding was not a space where girls and women would easily feel welcome. While a few, female skaters found a way to deal with the male and latently sexist environment, the sport seemed to put off girls and women precisely for the reasons described. This was exactly the reason why some activists and NGOs sought to organise separate skateboarding sessions and workshops exclusively for girls and women. In such a context, female skaters were freed from worrying about sexism and could concentrate fully on the sport.

4.4.4 The intimidating atmosphere of male dominated skateboarding spaces

The gender stereotypes prevalent in skateboarding had a fundamental impact on the interaction between male and female skaters. This was particularly relevant for girls and young women, who were confronted with various forms of sexism in the male dominated world of skateboarding. The (few) female street skateboarders I got to know a bit better in the course of my research described how they often felt intimidated in male dominated skateboarding spaces, as they experienced being stereotyped and othered, felt under pressure to legitimate their presence, and developed the feeling of being in the wrong place (cf. Abulhawa 2020: 47). Even for me as an identified man, it sometimes felt challenging to spend time in skateparks and skate spots occupied by boys and young men, especially when I hardly knew anyone there. Although I could fundamentally rely on being accepted to some degree as part of a temporary male collective, there was something intimidating

about male skate spaces. At times I chose to remain passive instead of engaging in the practice, afraid of being ridiculed by the skilled boys and young men ‘owning’ the skateparks or skate spots that I could certainly not impress with the basic skating-skills I had. This perception of skateparks as intimidating spaces was a recurrent topic among beginner skaters and girls and women. For example, Khanyisile, a Black woman in her early 20s, had befriended Erin, a Black teenage girl, in a skate NGO. Both were beginner skateboarders and liked to exercise together. The NGO’s program was overseen by three young men in their late 20s and early 30s, two of them European volunteers, with no deeper knowledge and awareness about gender issues and feminism in the local context. As the NGO’s skatepark was open to the public and one of only two street skateparks in the CBD of Cape Town, it was visited by many, largely male skaters and the park usually turned into a male dominated space during the course of an afternoon. While Erin and Khanyisile regularly found a sparsely frequented park where they could practice in peace, especially on the earlier afternoons of the week, the pronounced male dominance visibly intimidated them on later afternoons and weekends, as Khanyisile pointed out:

Khanyisile: I know this with Erin also. She won’t skate a lot when the boys, or when it is just her and the boys, but then when I come I will like ask ‘so have you been training and doing the kickflip?’ and she is like ‘no, the last time I did it was when you were here’. Like ‘What? You should do it, let’s do it’ and then we do it. And she is got good attention, but it is just that she is, she feels intimidated by the boys in a way.

Interviewer: Ya.

Khanyisile: Same with Erin when she is not here, I won’t really skate, because I just need a girl around to skate.

Interviewer: Even me, I am also intimidated by all these good guys.

Khanyisile: What?! [laughing] Really? I knew it, you are a chick, just kidding!
[laughing]

From my participant observations in this NGO, I developed the impression that the fear of not being able to prove the masculine connoted requirements to confident, advanced male skaters and the consequent development of a feeling of gender based exclusion, played a major role in discouraging potentially interested girls and women (cf. Abulhawa 2020: 47). Carol too, despite being an advanced skater, perceived male dominated skate spaces as rather discouraging for girls and women based on her experiences:

Carol: Personally for me it was always a case of like not seeing other girls skate. And you know, as a human being you naturally want to go along with something that you are comfortable with, that you have been exposed to, that you can relate to, that you can associate with. And there were never really any girls skating. And then when I eventually found girls who would skate, I was like, cool, now I can skate with you guys, all the time, everyday, every other day. And that, you know, it is just about building a community. But other than that there are obviously a lot of men and women actually, who say like, women shouldn't skate. And when they do skate, they are not anywhere near as good as the men, etc. So just like a lot of smack-talk. And like putting women down. Just like, and I experience a lot of homophobia in the community as well.

Women and girls often felt not taken seriously and implicitly relegated to passive roles on the sidelines by male skaters (cf. Bayton 1997: 46f.; Wacquant 2004: 51). This was rarely the case offensively, but often rather subtly. Male dominated skateboarding spaces were latently permeated by an intimidating atmosphere that particularly affect girls and women, but at times also boys and men who did not live up to the masculine ideals of advanced skateboarding. Not fulfilling the masculine connoted ideals amounted to a feminisation of the respective athletes, which played a more or less subtle role in their devaluation in a subculture and sport idealising masculine connoted behaviour, as 'insults' like 'skate like a girl' suggested. A diffuse competitive atmosphere was noticeable in certain skateparks and at certain skate pots. Particularly notorious for this was a skatepark in Gardens, in Cape Town, as former professional skater Yusuf vividly described when I met him and an acquaintance for a coffee in the city:

Lester: How did you find the Gardens skatepark?

Yusuf: It's nice, but I don't like to go there if it is too full.

Lester: Does it get that full?

Yusuf: It get's packed, and then it's like showdown, you know.

Lester: Are you serious?

Yusuf: Ya, if you don't have a trick you gotta sit down.

Lester: Are you serious?

Yusuf: Ya dude, it is hard on the dance floor there.

Lester: Wow.

Yusuf: Friday afternoon it's hot, Saturday is hot. You can't just pull in there and hang around, you gotta skate. [laughing]

Interviewer: [laughing] Ok.

Yusuf: Yaya.

Interviewer: What happens if you like, if you don't stand your tricks, if you don't land them?

Yusuf: People won't say or do anything, but there is a general unspoken feeling of what's happening.

Interviewer: Oh, ok.

Yusuf: No one would say 'Ey, what the fuck are you doing?!'

Interviewer: You will feel it?

Yusuf: You don't feel great.

Interviewer: Ok, I see.

Yusuf: So ya, there is social pressures. Which is what skateboarding always has, there is always that sense of you wanna be good, you wanna make people scream, you don't want them to make look away or ask them to move.

Although skateboarding is often called an individual, non-competitive sport and distinguished from traditional sports, it involves various collective practices and more or less direct forms of competition. Yusuf's use of the term 'dance floor' for the skatepark hints towards the fact that skaters often perform in front of an audience, which consists of other skaters and passers-by watching from the side. In skate spaces, there is often an unspoken expectation that the performance on 'the stage' will entertain or even awe the audience. Skaters are expected to impress and astonish. The extent to which this is the case, especially when the audience is made up of other skaters, is measured by the traditional, recognised practices that I looked at in more detail earlier in the thesis. Valued is a performance with a strong masculine connotation, in which skills, style, coolness, self-confidence and courage are exhibited. Only those who meet the unspoken requirements are considered worthy of participation in the game played out. As the skateboarding game is gendered because of the masculine connotations of the dispositions that are to be put on display, in spaces like the one described by Yusuf, a form of a "male violent game" as characterised by Bourdieu (2005: 93f.) seems to take place. Individuals who are not capable of performing the masculine connoted

practices of the game are devalued and excluded through more or less direct mechanisms (cf. Langa 2020: 106; Morrell 2001a: 18; Reihling 2020: 49). This dynamic seems to explain why especially beginners addressed an intimidating atmosphere in skateparks. In the usually male dominated skate spaces, it could make active skateboarding an unpleasant experience particularly for girls and women, creating additional pressure to perform and causing fears of confirming sexist stereotypes. Melissa Williams, for example, emphasised the challenge of the pressure to perform in an interview in 2003 when she was asked about the biggest challenge in male dominated skateboarding spaces:

“[Interviewer:] What are your biggest challenges as a standout in a male dominated sport?

[Williams:] Not being good enough. I don’t want to be seen as some dumb girl who doesn’t know what she’s doing, which unfortunately sometimes I feel I am. I think my biggest challenge is to skate as good as they skate, which at times I don’t feel I can do. There is nothing for guys to compare girl skating to except guys’ skating, so a lot of them judge girls inaccurately.

[Interviewer:] Have you experienced stinky vibes or rather welcome support from the guys?

[Williams:] Both. Sometimes guys can be real assholes but I think that’s just been the general ‘attitude’ of a lot of the skaters lately. Some guys try to make themselves feel big or confident by bringing other people down, and as a girl I guess I’m an easy target for people like that. But all my friends totally support my skating and there are so many guys who push and help my skating that it’s not even worth thinking about the stinky vibes, although a lot of guys still prefer the pretty poser girls rather than the hardcore ones busting up besides them.” (blunt 7/2 2003: 58)

A feeling of not being welcome in skateboarding spaces was further reinforced by latent sexist and homophobic behaviour in skateparks and at skate spots that often doubled as hangout-spots for boys and young men (rarely for girls and women) who would sometimes more or less intentionally voice sexist terms and statements. A ‘bro culture’ involving latently vulgar and sexist language was quite common among the male skaters I spent time with, and in much of skateboarding media. While boys and men were often referred to as ‘bros’, ‘ouens’ ‘bruhs’, ‘brahs’, ‘dudes’ ‘homies’ and ‘brothers’, male skaters occasionally referred to women and girls as ‘chicks’ and ‘bitches’. With such terminology girls and women were implicitly humiliated, reduced to sexualised objects and certainly not recognised as (potential) equal participants in the skateboarding game. However, when girls and women were present, most male skaters were visibly becoming more careful with the use of sexist language that they used predominantly when being among other male skaters. Although

there were also liberal and progressive attitudes regarding gender and sexuality among the skaters, some explicitly rejected and criticised sexist and homophobic attitudes, this seemed to be a (vocal) minority. A significant share of male skaters tended to display a 'top dog behaviour', making girls and women feel unwelcome in skateparks and at skate spots (cf. Atencio/Beal/Wilson 2009: 13). Even though an increasing number of organisations was advocating for empowerment of girls and women in skateboarding, the sport's culture did not strike me as encouraging critical engagement with sexism. This seemed to contribute to the perception of public skateparks and skate spots by female skaters as unwelcoming, intimidating and unsafe male spaces.

4.4.5 Controversial debates, changing realities and NGO programs

Despite the fact that sexism played a visible role in South African skateboarding, skateboarders did hold quite differing attitudes regarding girls, women, femininity and homosexuality in the skate scene. There were skaters who never voiced sexist or homophobic remarks in my presence and had no objections to women and girls in skateboarding. Part of the skateboarding world was undoubtedly open-minded and tolerant. To a certain extent, skateboarding culture was characterised by openness and a vague appreciation of diversity involving race, class, gender, sexuality and (dis)ability. Quite a number of skaters I met saw themselves as outsiders, outcasts or urban rebels, and tended to be generally sympathetic towards marginalised social groups and social struggles. This seemed to be facilitated by the fact that street skaters, through their exposition to public urban spaces, regularly got in touch with all kinds of marginalised people on the street, and gained insights into their situation and daily challenges. While there were skaters who were not interested in the perspectives, problems and suffering of others, many skaters seemed to develop a basic empathy for other marginalised, heavy users of the street, for example with small street vendors, car guards, homeless people, sex workers and drug addicts. There was also a widespread perception among skateboarders that the subculture was frequented by rather open-minded individuals who maintained a critical stances towards forms of discrimination and violence, and tended towards being politically liberal or left. But this could hardly be generalised, as part of the scene, despite a progressive aura, seemed to hold quite conservative values and perspectives, especially regarding gender and sexuality in various respects. Moreover, for many skaters skateboarding culture was only one influence among others in life, and the wider life realities and lifestyles of skaters played a significant role in shaping their views and attitudes.

Interestingly, during my research, a greater number of male skateboarders seemed, even if they were quite critical of sexism or homophobia, to condone respective discriminatory attitudes and language

among their peers. I could witness this repeatedly when I hung out with skaters at skate spots and in skateparks. Many male skaters tended to regard machismo, sexism and homophobia as aspects inseparable of skateboarding culture, although they themselves did not hold or voice such views. Rarely, I had the impression, were gender issues, sexism and homophobia openly discussed. On some occasions, I witnessed heated debates among male skateboarders who argued about whether girls and women could skateboard just as well as boys and men, and about reasons for the general marginalisation of women in South African street skateboarding. Ayusch, for example, was skateboarding in Johannesburg since the 1990s and appreciated the growing number of girls and women in skateboarding, and followed and recognised the successes of international and local female skateboarders. He was also not hesitant to advocate his positive attitude towards female skaters among Johannesburg street skaters, among whom women played almost no role, and challenged the stereotypical thinking of some male skaters that they could not be outdone by women:

Ayusch: And I also, I had a conversation with a couple of the ous at LBGs, couple of the guys and this thing came up. And they were like, nah, switch tre[flip]¹³⁷, ah, there is no, because it got into a conversation about chicks and stuff, and then they were like, nah, there is no way that a girl is gonna do a switch tre. And I was like, what, I am sure dude! You know what, by now, like, it's 2017, 2018, there is obviously a chick that will kick your ass. Like it's insane to think that there is no girl that skates better than you. And there is, because you can see the pros. Like, I watched clips on Insta, I watch clips on Insta all the time, there is chicks doing shit like you can never ever dream of doing dude, like fuck. I have seen that Brazilian girl Leticia Bufoni.

Interviewer: Ya.

Ayusch: Like she does front feebls [feeble grind] on tranni. Like I can never do this shit dude. She does all this kinda shit on tranni. Front Feebles, like, yasis dude, she can skate.

When I asked Ayusch about his opinion about the reasons for the tiny number of girls and women in the Johannesburg's street skateboarding scene, he was struggling to give an answer, though. For some liberal male skaters, who were aware of the manifold societal forces causing gender related inequalities, the concrete causes for the tiny number of girls and women in the scene were hard to pinpoint. The top female skaters visible in the media in recent years, such as Leticia Bufoni and Lacey Baker, after all, demonstrated that women could definitely develop into highly skilled riders.

¹³⁷ A switch tre flip is a particularly hard to perform flip trick and therefore signifies a particularly high skill-level of a skateboarder, if he or she can perform it.

Skaters like Ayusch did not hold sexist attitudes, but at the same time, maybe due to their few contacts with female skateboarders, seemed hardly familiar with the specific challenges faced by female skaters. In fact, some male skaters bemoaned that so few women and girls were part of the scene, and wished there would be more. Because of the extensive absence of women, passionate skaters in particular spent much of their free time in homosocial male groups. This had its own appeal and meaning for male skaters, but it also had downsides. For men comprehensively involved in skateboarding, the price of dedication to the game over masculinity among men could be that it was difficult to develop relationships with women through the subculture, and thus, for example, to have few chances to find oneself in friendships or heterosexual relationships with women who were understanding of or even involved in their passion. Consequently, some boys and men welcomed and wished an increasing number of female skaters, but did often not know how to do something about it, like Ayusch, whose circle of friends consisted almost solely of skaters with very few women among them:

Ayusch: Not that like girls couldn't come skate with us, I wish there was girls that would come skate, but like I don't know, sometimes I wonder, maybe it's a comfort issue, they don't feel entirely comfortable.

Interviewer: Like with the guys?

Ayusch: With the guys and shit, yeah.

Interviewer: Ya.

Ayusch: Whatever the reasons, I always, like I told, whenever I meet girls now, yeez, I like I respect that, because it's one of the definitely, the newest improvements in skateboarding is that there is a lot of girls starting to skate. And like girls that actually start skating seriously.

Although the commercial skateboarding world in particular disseminated often rather conservative gender ideals and stereotype via events and the media, with girls and women increasingly being made visible in the 2010s in the context of a diversity trend, sexism was reproduced and confronted by skaters in various ways. And depending on their background, political beliefs and various other aspects, skaters had differing perspectives on gender relations. Men like Ayusch were open-minded, enjoyed the community aspect of the Johannesburg skateboarding scene, and valued all kinds of styles, provided the skaters were passionate about them. In his view of skateboarding there was no reason why women and girls could not be legitimate participants. Other skaters welcomed diversity

in terms of race and class, but skateboarding seemed to them to be an important element in the constitution of their masculinity and a space where one could be among boys and men. In interviews, this aspect was often talked about implicitly, the skaters assumed the skate scene to be a space devoid of girls and women, they weren't even made part of the equation. For example, Joel spoke in this way about the street scene in Johannesburg:

Joel: Joburg respects Joburg. Hardcore. Straight up, I have seen that. And like dudes, like it's such a brotherly thing how the skate scene here is so brotherly, it's like naturally just like, and I realise like I used to think that that was skateboarding. But I realise it's Johannesburg skateboarding. You know, it's Johannesburg skateboarding, it's very brotherly here. We're all struggling. You don't have time for beef.

For these young men, girls and women were simply not thought of as members of the scene, which as a 'brotherhood' was an all-male affair. This didn't necessarily mean that such men (and boys) held sexist attitudes in other spheres of life or generally devalued femininity. Rather, they regarded the world of skateboarding a separate realm and exclusively male space in which masculinity could be developed, expressed and shared in a (loose) collective with other boys and men, and in which the mere presence and active participation of girls and women could be perceived as disturbing, irritating or even threatening to the masculine identity (cf. Heissenberger 2018: 290ff., 300ff.).

Interestingly, among the few and loudest male critics of sexism in skateboarding I encountered during my research stay was a group of evangelical Christian skateboarders running skateboarding programs in different parts of the country. In fact, some but not all representatives of this group were the only male skateboarders I got to know who explicitly and openly criticised the at times sexualised, objectifying portrayal of women in skateboarding media and at skateboarding events. They even confronted the issue in an activist fashion by approaching the organisers at commercial events and doing 'educational work' among the visitors, which often seemed to be on the edge of missionary work. Although they were skaters themselves, the Christian activists held a quite negative perception of skateboarding culture, which they saw as promoting sinful values, norms and behaviours to children and youth. I made quite similar to observations in this context as Abraham (2017: 96f.) described in his book on evangelical activism in extreme sports. For Thomas, activist of a Christian skate NGO near Cape Town, the objectification of women was part of a larger complex of problematic elements in skateboarding culture:

Interviewer: What do you think are like common negative elements in skateboarding, or that you see in skateboarding culture?

Thomas: Ya, just like sexual stuff, you know, just making girls to be very keen and using, using girls as an image that's, that's, that's, that's, it's not a person, you know.

Interviewer: Like objectifying women?

Thomas: Ya, girls become an object, you know. So that happens in skateboarding a lot.

The Christian activists seemed to intend 'protecting' the women involved from being treated as sexualised objects and the (male) skaters from being exposed to influences glorifying promiscuous values and behaviours. For the evangelical Christian activists, however, it was not a feminist perspective that informed their activities, but a particular interpretation of evangelical Christianity that constituted the fundament for their criticism. They rejected sexualised depictions of women and premarital sexuality, yet, they did not critique patriarchal power relations (Abraham 2017: 137). In fact, the group of Christian skateboarders consisted exclusively of boys and men. And the Christian skateboarders did not fundamentally differ in their tough guy and latent macho habitus from other skateboarders. For them, too, the absence of girls and women in skateboarding was a matter of course, the sport and subculture regarded a male realm. When I asked skateboarding pastor Thomas if the Christian NGO promoted women and girls, he avoided responding to the question. In contrast to other NGOs, the Christian skaters' program did not feature opportunities for girls, and the few times I was visiting the skatepark I never encountered any skateboarding girls or women. The evangelical skaters merely criticised misogynous aspects in the culture of skateboarding that they perceived as disrespectful, sexualised and promiscuous (Abraham 2017: 87). According to Abraham, the Evangelical activists in the Western Cape found a productive combination of evangelical and extreme sports masculinities that they promoted through their programs and activism (Abraham 2017: 100). The evangelical interpretation stripped skateboarding of stereotypically ascribed controversial elements, especially drug use, law-breaking, premarital sex, and a disrespectful treatment of girls and women.¹³⁸ The activism of the Christian skaters aimed towards modifying and changing (young) skateboarders' masculine self-conception towards a morally and ethically cleaner form according to the evangelical world view. In fact, they identified

138 The resulting 'harmless' interpretation of skateboarding, which was a family-friendly antithesis to the skate-and-destroy approach, was ridiculed or even found annoying by quite a number of street skaters Cape Town. Evangelical Christian missionary activism in particular was perceived as intrusive, especially by skateboarders who were atheists or agnostics, or who were practising another religion. However, because the Christian skateboarders were at the same time really ambitious athletes and there were some top skateboarders in the city in their circle, they nevertheless enjoyed general acceptance in the scene.

skateboarding as a problematic societal sphere impacting boys and men in negative ways, leading to a somehow paternalistic approach to ‘save’ skateboarders from the ‘evils of skateboarding culture’. A small number of organisations and activist groups were addressing sexism and the marginalisation of women in the skate scene in a much more direct and comprehensive way, practically performing a form of feminist activism within the context of skateboarding. This was to be seen as part of an activist trend that had noticeably gained momentum in North American and Western European skateboarding in the 2010s (Abulhawa 2020: 30-34, 54). On the one hand, there were skate NGOs who explicitly aimed for the inclusion of girls and women, for example by specifically recruiting girls for their programs and offering girls-only skateboarding workshops, and were advocating for general female empowerment through skateboarding. In South Africa, this was especially the case in the NGO Skateistan, which was the only NGO to offer an extensive girls-only program in the inner-city of Johannesburg.¹³⁹ The NGO Indigo operating in different parts of Cape Town ensured that half of the participants of its programs were girls, at least during the time I was visiting their workshops, and they occasionally offered girls-only sessions.¹⁴⁰ Other NGOs took up the cause of promoting girls and women in their concepts, but did not systematically put it into practice. For example, a German NGO ran a program in Cape Town’s CBD claiming to ‘empower’ girls and women in its marketing activities.¹⁴¹ Practically, though, the largely male staff of the NGO was hardly paying attention to gender issues, did not promote female skateboarding in separate programs and only a small number of girls were among the regular visitors of the NGO’s skatepark. As mentioned earlier in the interview with Khanyisile, who used to visit the NGO now and then, girls and women could feel intimidated by boys and men dominating the park, illustrating the lack of attention for gender issues and the reproduction of male preponderance in the context of the NGO-site.

On the other hand, a small number of informal initiatives promoting female skateboarding and addressing gender inequalities in skateboarding came and went between 2016 and 2020. All these initiatives were driven by skateboarding women. In contrast to the larger NGOs, the women-led activism was directly addressing the immediate challenges female encountered in male dominated contexts. When I was conducting fieldwork in Cape Town in 2016 and 2017, an initiative named ‘Girls can skate’ was running irregular workshops and a social media presence. In 2020, the group

139 Skateistan (n.d.): Johannesburg [website], online-source: <https://skateistan.org/location/southafrica> [accessed: 09.09.2020].

140 Indigo Youth Movement (n.d.): How We Roll [website], online-source: <https://indigoyouthmovement.org/about> [accessed: 9.9.2020].

141 skate-aid international e.V. (n.d.): Südafrika, Kapstadt [website], online-source: <https://www.skate-aid.org/en/projects/africa/southafrica-capetown> [accessed: 9.9.2020].

‘Girls skate South Africa’¹⁴² was formed and organised skate workshops for girls and women in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban. Feminist activists in skateboarding certainly succeeded in bringing gender-critical perspectives into public discourse. In an interview, activist Sharne Jacobs explained that the goal was to create private safe spaces devoid of “the intimidation factor [...] and danger of public parks”¹⁴³. This temporary creation of safe spaces for girls and women was a central concern of these initiatives, which thus also formulated a practical critique of sexism in skateboarding.

However, the activism’s practical and lasting effects were often quite limited, because it consisted mostly of holding a small number of workshops to create temporary ‘safe spaces’ in usually male dominated environments, like in private and public skateparks, promoting social connections among the small number of female skaters and making female skateboarding medially visible. This was without a doubt an important contribution to the promotion of female skateboarding. Yet, the small scale of the activism was due in particular to the fact that the small initiatives had few resources to implement more extensive programmes. Moreover, the quasi-feminist NGOs and activists could do little to challenge the structural and direct forms of discrimination in the extremely male dominated subculture and industry, and in the wider society. In fact, none of the initiatives I encountered addressed the wider structural forces and obstacles that made it hard for girls and women to access the sport. Although sporadic workshops enabled girls and women to engage in the sport temporarily, they hardly opened up opportunities for long-term, self-determined practice. This was a problem that all skateboard NGOs encountered in a way. Girls and young women eventually fell out of the programmes. Workers of an NGO in Johannesburg, for example, explained to me that they would not consider girls attending their workshops even as future skateboarders. For although the girls in the NGO took part in weekly skating workshops and developed advanced skating skills, they could often not practice the sport outside the NGO premises: because of the dangers in public space, the lack of economic capital to afford the equipment and due to the sexism in the skating scene rendering it an uncomfortable space for them outside the NGO’s protected environment. The girls could only devote themselves to the practice temporarily, namely when the NGO provided them with the necessary resources. At a certain point or age, many girls left the NGO program and skateboarding behind.¹⁴⁴

142 Girls Skate South Africa (n.d.): A Social Community Organisation [website], online-source: <https://www.girlsskatesouthafrica.org> [accessed: 09.09.2020].

143 Mphande, Zimbeni (28.08.2020): Skater girls get ready to shred at the new skatepark in Randburg, The South African, online-source: <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/girls-skate-south-africa-new-skatepark-randburg> [accessed: 25.06.2021].

144 This problem became particularly apparent to me in Johannesburg. Until a few months before the start of my field research, an NGO had offered skateboarding workshops in the neighbourhood Troyville, but had then moved the

Despite the immediately beneficial effects of NGO activism, NGOs and activists contributed in a quite ambivalent way to the debate on sexism and homophobia in skateboarding. On the one hand, they brought these topics on the agenda, allowed a small number of girls and women to engage in the sport, and might have contributed to create a fertile soil future feminist activism could grow on. These organisations were important in showing that girls and women could practice the sport when they had the opportunity: They created ‘role models’ and actively promoted female skateboarding on a small scale. Yet, they seemed to be largely ignored by the male-centred skateboarding media cosmos and were mostly recognised by mainstream media platforms. The impact on the male dominated scene was quite limited. With their pragmatic and small-scale approach, the activists moreover even risked to conceal the structural reasons for the marginalisation and exclusion of girls and women. The NGOs tended to disseminate the image that engaging in skateboarding was a question of will and bravery, and that girls and women only needed to be given the self-confidence to believe in themselves and try it out. A structurally caused problem was thus shifted to individual responsibility and abilities (cf. Dogra 2014: 35f.; Manji/O’Coill 2002: 571, 576). This also led to the fact that structural obstacles were often not taken into account in the conceptualisation of NGO programmes and that these programmes could therefore barely achieve long-term effects (cf. Abulhawa 2020: 48). Some NGO activism seemed to be rather symbolic and insular, allowing a small number of girls and women to access the sport temporarily without tackling the fundamental issues leading to their exclusion and marginalisation. That activism promoting female athletes and gender equality in skateboarding was a thing at all, however, suggested that machismo and male dominance were no longer a matter of course in South African skateboarding, but were increasingly being questioned. This development clearly suggested that in the long run skateboarding could not hide from the challenging of sexism and misogyny, and the diversification of social relations.

program area after finishing the construction of a private skatepark in Maboneng. I met several girls and boys who had participated in workshops of the NGO in Troyville. During the visits to the neighbourhood, I lent a number of local children my skateboard, which they skilfully and joyfully rode. It was immediately obvious from their advanced skills that they had spent a lot of time in the NGO workshops and were highly motivated to engage in the sport. Yet, the children could no longer participate in the workshops due to the change of location, as this required a walk of about 20 minutes through an unsafe area, as they told me. Especially girls had fallen out of the program after the change. The skilled female skaters I met would certainly have pursued the sport, but they lacked the resources to engage in it on their own. Having been brought into skateboarding by the NGO, they were now faced with the bleak reality of no longer being able to practise the sport they were introduced to. In the course of my research, I encountered this issue recurrently with NGO programmes. As they were often short-term and under-resourced, programmes seemed to come and go continuously.

4.4.6 Homophobia and doubted masculinity in skateboarding

As numerous scholars have illuminated, homophobia is a characteristic phenomenon in masculine social spaces and in male dominated sports (cf. Bourdieu 2005: 93-96.; Connell 2005: 54, 78f.; Connell/Messerschmidt 2005: 833; Heissenberger 2018: 269ff.; Langa 2020: 66). Street skateboarding in South Africa was no exception. Moreover, it was not necessarily a special case when it came to homophobia in the wider society. Despite the progressive South African constitution in which same-sex marriages were legalised in 2006, gay and lesbian couples were granted the right to adopt children in 2002, and Cape Town being called the ‘gay capital’ of the African continent by some voices (Camminga 2020: 206), homophobic violence remained a major problem (Langa 2020: 66, 106). Gays and lesbians were at a particularly high risk of suffering forms of discrimination and violence that could comprise (corrective) rape and murder. Being gay or lesbian in South Africa was, in other words, dangerous (Adeagbo 2019: 77f.).

It became clear during the course of my fieldwork that also skateboarding was certainly not a particularly comfortable environment for gay boys and men. Homophobia was sporadically articulated and popped up here and there in more or less obvious forms. With the exception of the well-known top-skateboarder Yann Horowitz, gay skaters seemed to be comprehensively absent in the scene. Yet, it was unlikely that Horowitz was the only gay skateboarder in the country at the time. It could be assumed that, similar to US skateboarding¹⁴⁵, gay skateboarders chose to hide their sexual orientation to avoid stigmatisation and discrimination, which reinforced their invisibility. Heissenberger had investigated a similar phenomenon in European soccer in his dissertation (Heissenberger 2018: 308).

In male dominated spaces homosexuality is often a controversial, yet not particularly visible topic, that quite often makes heterosexual boys and men uncomfortable. According to some authors in gender and masculinity studies, devaluing homosexuality and painting it as a threatening occurrence is characteristic in many homosocial male spaces, like monasteries, single-sex educational institutions, fraternities, the military, certain working environments and sports (cf. Bourdieu 2005: 95f.; Connell 2005: 78). Interestingly, this (perceived) threatening effect of homosexual desire is rooted precisely in the pronounced potential for homoeroticism in male spaces. After all, the paradox of homosocial, male dominated spaces is that boys and men spend time very closely, perhaps even intimately, together in them. This was certainly the case with street skateboarding, which was characterised by quite a number of potentially homoerotic aspects. Some skaters spent

145 Welch, Patrick (09.08.2016): The Last Taboo: Why are there so few openly gay pro skaters?, Huck Magazine, <https://www.huckmag.com/perspectives/reportage-2/gay-skaters> [accessed: 24.06.2021].

most of their (free) time among boys and men, and had little or no comparable close relationships with girls and women. Male skateboarders spent much time observing and admiring other boys and men, and judging the aesthetic of their bodily practices and appearance. Passionate skateboarders also spend a lot of time outside skate spaces looking at skateboarding boys and men in videos, magazines and on websites. When skateboarders practised on hot days with bare torsos, their skin shiny from sweat, more obvious homoerotic aspects could come into play in skateboarding spaces (cf. Borden 2001: 147f.; Connell 2005: 102). Among the skaters I spent time with, the inherent potential of homoeroticism was mainly contained by delegitimising any sexualisation of the male game, it was virtually unthinkable among heterosexual male skaters that homosexual desire could play a role in the sport.

As Heissenberger argues, the presence of gay boys and men creates a 'threat' from the point of view of heterosexual males, since the unspoken exclusion of homosexual desire assumed by the participants becomes fragile (cf. Heissenberger 2018: 96f.). In the presence of gay boys and men, the potential arises that the involved boys and men are no longer observed and admired only as physically hard-working athletes, but possibly also as sexual objects of desire (Heissenberger 2018: 95f.). In such a situation, heterosexual boys and men can thus find or imagine themselves in a role that is usually occupied by girls and women in the traditional gender order. A (perceived) demasculinisation, feminisation and devaluation is the possible effect in the eyes heterosexual boys and men (Adams 2005: 67; Bourdieu 2005: 95f.). Accordingly, many heterosexual boys and men avoid anything that could be associated with homosexuality (Langa 2020: 66). Homosociality requires for this reason a comprehensive 'desexualisation' of social interaction that excludes this dynamic and preserves the (heterosexual) masculinity producing effect of the respective space (Heissenberger 2018: 95f.), but also leads to the tabooing and exclusion of homosexuality, and nurturing of homophobic attitudes (cf. Connell 2005: 102).

Furthermore, insecurity and fears resulting from homophobia among boys and men can lead to various forms of defensive behaviour, from denial to withdrawal to degradation or even forms of violence. Indeed, the opinion that gay boys and men are in some way abnormal, inferior and to a degree threatening seemed to be quite widespread among skateboarders, which mirrored images circulating throughout the South African society. On a linguistic level, homophobia was occasionally present when skaters used terms like 'gay', 'faggot' and 'moffie' to humiliate or tease other boys and men (cf. Connell 2005: 78f.; Petrone 2010: 123). International and South African skateboarding media had provided numerous templates for the denigration of homosexuality in the past (cf. Yochim 2007: 233; Petrone 2010: 123f.) that could 'productively' interact with existing

homophobic attitudes among South African boys and men. I will come back to this point later on. Certainly, homophobia was not a specific issue of South African skateboarding.

To better grasp dynamics around homosexuality and homophobia in skateboarding, I take a closer look at the case of South African professional skateboarder Yann Horowitz. During my research, Horowitz was counted as one of the best street skateboarders in the country, and he was at the time of my fieldwork the only (professional) skater who had come out as gay at a certain point of his career in South Africa. The first time I heard of Horowitz was when I was meeting a couple skaters in Johannesburg's inner city about two weeks after I had arrived in the country. I got into a conversation with an experienced street skateboarder who gave me an overview about the, in his opinion, best skateboarders of the country at the time. He came to talk about Yann Horowitz whose skill and style of skateboarding he particularly admired. Concluding his comments on Horowitz he was emphasising "He is a gay skateboarder!". He said these words with marked astonishment, so that I could not tell whether he found it simply remarkable or somehow unsettling that Horowitz was gay. I made a note of the skateboarder's comments and later looked up videos and interviews of Horowitz, and was astonished by the unusual case of this gay skater in a country known for a high rate of homophobic violence. In the course of my research, I briefly met Horowitz at some skate contests, but unfortunately I found no opportunity to do an interview with him. My comments on Horowitz therefore refer solely to how the professional skateboarder was perceived and talked about by other skateboarders, and to his public statements in print and video. As I will show, Horowitz was a recognised authority in the local scene and his case helps to illuminate characteristic issues gay boys and men faced in the context of South African skateboarding. In addition, the exploration allows for a better understanding of how gayness has been talked about in South African skateboarding.

I got into conversations a few times about Horowitz and the connection between being gay and skateboarding when conducting interviews. Horowitz was well-known among skateboarders countrywide. He had been active for over a decade, was a regular presence in skateboarding media, charismatic and cultivated a recognised skate style. When I got into conversations with skaters about the role of gender and sexuality, the name Horowitz recurringly came up. This also had to do with Horowitz's rather high media profile. George, a former professional skateboarder and skateboard entrepreneur who was well connected in the Cape Town scene, referred to and spoke highly of Horowitz when I asked him about homophobia in the scene. As a skater and entrepreneur, George was also friends with and a sponsor of Horowitz:

George: We skateboarders are probably the most tolerant, in a sense. Like Yann [Horowitz], did you meet Yann?

Interviewer: Not yet.

George: You know he is gay, like he

Interviewer: Ok.

George: Ya. And like, he rode for me, he still rides for like my shop, he, I put him on my company, he came out the closet, we were like, fuck yeah. Yeah, I think everything must be more like, I like everything to be more against the grain, you know like the best, I love the fact that the best, gnarliest skateboarder in fucking South Africa is a gay dude.

Interviewer: That's amazing, yeah.

George: This dude kills himself, he is just so fucking brutal, so be careful anytime you throw the word 'faggot' around for someone not doing something, you know what I mean, 'cause we got a, we got a bro here, so just chill.

Horowitz was known in the skateboarding scene for his high skill, fluid style and his readiness to instrumentalise his body to the maximum, performing extremely daring and risky manoeuvres. Horowitz once even suffered a heart attack caused by overexertion in a skateboard contest.¹⁴⁶ Put bluntly, he was without question one of the most skilled and 'gnarliest' skateboarders in the country practically exceeding the masculine connoted traits that were valued among skateboarders. He was gaining much recognition for his technically and physically demanding, and risky style of skating street in South Africa and abroad. With his bulky, muscular body he looked solid as a rock, underlining his taker qualities. At a 2018 Vans Park Series contest in Cape Town, I got to see Horowitz's reckless style first hand. The contest took place in a gigantic bowl located in an indoor skatepark. After a number of high-profile skaters had put on a spectacular show, Horowitz trumped all other skaters with a flawless run and an extremely daring jump out of the bowl against a concrete pillar of the arena, from which he pushed off and landed back in the bowl continuing his line. Horowitz was known for such daredevil moves and deservedly won the contest. On the winners' podium he passionately kissed his boyfriend in front of the cheering audience, a remarkable statement in the world of skateboarding.¹⁴⁷ On and off the board, Horowitz was an exceptionally confident athlete. In the Capetonian lifestyle-magazine *The Lake*, an article of former professional-

146 Kingsford, Henry (03.03.2015): Yann Horowitz interview, Grey Skate Mag, online-source: <https://www.greyskatemag.com/post/yann-horowitz-interview> [accessed: 07.09.2020].

147 Vans Park Series (11.10.2020): Pride – Yann Horowitz: A new Vans Europe skateboarding edit [website], online-source: <https://www.vansparkseries.com/posts/108734/pride-yann-horowitz> [accessed: 17.12.2020].

skateboarder Adrian Day captured what made Horowitz such a valued member of the South African skate scene:

“For many of us, Yann is the real deal. He embodies what the skateboarder should be. He’s accidentally iconoclastic and he doesn’t give a fuck about what you think. [...] His raw personality shines in his skating – it’s powerful and gnarly – even frightening at times, and in an age where kids fake their styles, this is nothing but the truth. [...] We were recently on tour with RVCA and Thrasher Magazine, with seven very heavy professionals from the US. He man-handled every spot, literally blew everyone away, thus kicking in his US door invitations in which travels are soon to follow. His footage productivity and 150% approach had the Americans pretty wide-eyed.” (Day 2016: 27)

For skateboarders like Day it was both Horowitz’s hard style and honed skills (even impressing the top-professionals from the US), and the open transgression of the norm of male heterosexuality in the world of skateboarding, which, in a sense, was an ultimate act of self-confidence and rebellion, not only challenging the wider society, but even the own subculture and scene. Due to the appreciation of radical individualism, self-expression and rebelliousness, skateboarding culture certainly promoted the acceptance of marginalised groups to a degree. Pulling something off against all odds is the ultimate statement in skateboarding, and this can include riding to the top as a gay skater and defying pejorative stereotypes with ease.

Yet, being gay in and of itself was not of value in South African skateboarding. Only in combination with skilled skateboarding and confident self-expression it could turn into a valued trait. Due to the homophobic tendencies in skateboarding highlighted earlier, gay boys and men faced anything but an easy ride, which also had an impact on Horowitz. The professional skater made this clear in numerous conversations and interviews where he commented on homophobia in (South African) skateboarding and how he dealt with it. In this way, he was an important, unusual voice speaking on behalf of gay skateboarders who, despite a small number of exceptions, remained largely invisible even in the international skateboarding discourse, similar to gay boys and men in other sports and youth cultures (Yochim 2007: 233). With his self-confident, friendly and eloquent nature, he seemed to easily disarm reservations and charmingly addressed issues gay skaters encounter. Horowitz did not trivialise the burden homophobia created for men like him in the world of skateboarding. Even though he had succeeded in becoming a celebrated professional skateboarder while confidently handling his sexual orientation, he did not downplay the pain that had accompanied him along the way.

Horowitz initially built a reputation in skateboarding while keeping his sexual orientation to himself. The fact that he was already a recognised skater when he came out was certainly an enormous advantage for him. In an interview with Jenkem Magazine, Horowitz described how coming out in the skateboarding scene and in his wider social surrounding was still a very challenging experience that took quite some preparations, the support of friends and family, and a good dose of courage. As Horowitz explained, despite having been a skater of a certain status already, he was worried that coming out could massively damage or even end his career in skateboarding. The pressure for Horowitz in the latently homophobic atmosphere must have been enormous:

“[Interviewer:] You wanted to establish yourself in the skate scene before you came out?”

[Horowitz:] Yeah, I don’t think it’s that I had to establish myself first, I was just lucky that I had. I was lucky that I’d been in the magazines a lot and that I was quite a well-respected skater in South Africa. I think that made it a little bit easier. Really I was just worried I was going to come out and it was going to end up becoming a gimmick in a way. I really didn’t want to ride on the whole ‘being gay’ thing, I wanted to be known as a skateboarder before first.

[Interviewer:] So when did you finally come out?

[Horowitz:] Well, I was kind of imploding around 18 or 19. I hadn’t really told anyone yet, and I was getting to the point where I was self-medicating too much to escape. So I made a deal with myself that at 21 I was going to come out to my family and if I didn’t – this might sound a bit heavy – I was going to kill myself. So at 21 I came out to my sister, then my parents, then the rest of my family, then slowly through friends. Then I came out in a skate interview shortly after that, just to like get it out of the way. I came to the point where I had enough people around me that loved me, I didn’t really give a fuck if anyone gave a fuck.

[Interviewer:] Did you know anything about the American skaters who had tried coming out, I’m thinking specifically of Tim Von Werne or Jarrett Berry?

[Horowitz:] I kind of read into their stories, knowing they kind of disappeared, and it did freak me out. I had to mentally prepare myself for backlash and possibly getting ostracized by the skate community. It’s all an internal struggle. I was so worried about what other people thought that it was slowly killing me.”¹⁴⁸

148 Kerr, Christian (26.06.2017): Learning From Yann Horowitz, The Gay South African Skater, Jenkem Magazine, <http://www.jenkemmag.com/home/2017/06/26/straight-talk-yann-horowitz-gay-south-african-skater> [accessed: 03.09.2020].

Horowitz exemplified that the meritocratic principle in skateboarding could promote the acceptance of marginalised individuals, if they confirmed to or exceeded the valued, masculine connoted standards. But his story also hinted towards the fact that among skateboarders sticking to the meritocratic principle could not be taken for granted, as even a well-recognised skater like him was worried if his outing would end his career and devalue his status in skateboarding he had build up over many years of dedicated involvement. In such stories, the true severity of the latent homophobia in skateboarding against gay boys and men became evident, since Horowitz, being familiar with the scene, could certainly assess the potential risks of a coming out from an insider perspective. One could say that the right not to be discriminated on the basis of gender and sexuality had to be earned by skaters by proving that they could fulfil or exceed the masculine connoted skills and dispositions valued. The feminisation associated with gayness had, in a sense, to be countered by an exaggerated masculine performance that in skateboarding most likely boils down to a skilled performance involving a hard instrumentalisation of the body (Abulhawa 2008: 69f.; Borden 2001: 149). It seems no coincidence that it was physical toughness and an iron will that were often emphasised about Horowitz. From George's point of view, Horowitz was one of the toughest skaters in the country, and for that very reason he had earned full respect, despite, or perhaps especially because he was gay:

George: I mean obviously like, the kid's gay and it must have been hard like for him. But then you think about how skateboarding is as well, it's like 'don't be a pussy', 'don't be a fag', you know what I mean, just like GO! You gotta be like tough.

Interviewer: Ya.

George: And I just love that aspect of it. Like this is the toughest fucking dude you ever met. Like literally. He'd be like a shitload of drugs and then go skate, and then just fucking kill it. [...] That's the thing, like, again, like, skateboarding, gay dudes, straight dudes, Black dudes, White dudes, it doesn't fucking matter like in skating, to me it never has.

It seemed that exceeding the masculine connoted traits valued 'compensated' for Horowitz' gayness. Horowitz practically and successfully refuted the stereotype of the effeminate gay man and spectacularly proved his masculinity. A similar compensatory logic had already been observed in other skateboarding contexts. Interviewer John Ortwet, for example, noted in a conversation with gay US skater Brian Anderson that he had witnessed how emphasising Anderson's toughness suddenly gained particular relevance after he had come out:

“After you came out, something that really surprised me was how your fellow skateboarders – and they were trying to be supportive – touted your manliness, and how ‘badass’ you are, as if someone’s sexual identity is somehow related to those things. It’s such an antiquated notion.”¹⁴⁹

The fact that being gay was not an easily accepted sexual orientation and that devaluing stereotypes circulated among heterosexual (male) skateboarders was thus becoming very visible in the emphasised exceptionality in which it was spoken about (when it was spoken about at all). Gay skaters were hereby implicitly demanded to refute circulating stereotypes by over-fulfilling masculine ideals and practically prove to be legitimate contestants in the ‘serious game over masculinity’. Similar to girls and women in skateboarding, they were clearly subjected to a double-standard which heterosexual skateboarders did not have to deal with (cf. Abulhawa 2008: 64; Bourdieu 2005: 161; Langa 2020: 66). Pointedly, Day brought this issue to the fore:

“Skateboarding is made up primarily of snotty teens, with little understanding of reality, and furthermore, in skateboarding you’ve got to be tough. You don’t want anyone to call you ‘faggot’ for not making your trick, and in previous eras even brands would graphically target and mock homosexuality. And while your peers are getting hammered and trying to fuck every girl at the bar, you are often expected to do the same. And if you don’t well, maybe you’re a . . .” (Day 2016: 27).

Day’s article cited here could be understood as an activist piece attesting the rise of liberal attitudes among skateboarders. Homophobia and sexism were increasingly addressed in the 2010s and even more so in the early 2020s, brought into the public discourse by a number of NGOs, activists and individuals. In South Africa, this was a certainly a new development, as my research into historical skateboarding magazines clearly revealed. In skateboarding magazines of the 1990s and 2000s like *blunt*, a critical discussion of homophobia was practically non-existent while a devaluation and stigmatisation of homosexuality was at times more or less openly communicated. In particular, a letter to the editor in an issue of *blunt* magazine from the year 2000 and the editor's response printed in the magazine caught my attention, which comprised a point-blank call for homophobically motivated exclusion of a gay skateboarder:

149 Ortvad, John (22.06.2017): Professional Skateboarder Brian Anderson Is Gay, Proud, and Has New Zine, *Vogue*, online-source: <https://www.vogue.com/article/brian-anderson-zine-cave-homo> [accessed: 19.11.2020].

“GAY FRIEND

Yo blunt, I have this friend who is so nice it is irritating. I say a stupid joke and he laughs his bloody head off. He curves his hair to the side all the time, and just because I skate he skates, and say if we go to McDonalds, he will have everything I have. All my other mates are schweet, except for this one, please help me. Unsigned

JP: Sounds like he's gay and wants to have his way with you. Avoid him like a sexually transmitted disease. His 'wannabeness' will wear off on you soon, be warned. [...]

HB: Everyone has a friend like that at some stage. If he grates you that much just stop hanging out with him. PS. You said he copies everything you do, does that mean you have gay hair as well?

MZ: Sounds like your friend just wants to be accepted. I think you should tell him how you feel as nicely as possible. Although I don't often agree with John or Harry here; there is a chance your friend is gay, but if he is that's no reason not to be his friend, as long as he knows that you aren't er, that way... are you? [Italics in the original source]” (blunt 4/6 2000: 16f.)

Although the call to break off contact due to the friend's presumed gayness was toned down by one of the commentators, it is clear from such excerpts of the then leading skateboarding publication that homophobia enjoyed a certain legitimacy in skateboarding at the time. The denigration of gay boys and men was not at all uncommon in the recent history of the sport (Borden 2001: 148; Yochim 2007: 15). This makes the increasing awareness of sexism and homophobia in skateboarding since the 2010s all the more remarkable. Yet, in the skateboarding scene of the late 2010s liberal voices coexisted with the persistence of corresponding forms of discrimination in the wider scene. The visible coverage of LGBT issues in the media could easily hide the fact that in the actual scene life, being gay was still stigmatised and athletes like Horowitz were unusual exceptions. As the only (openly) gay skater in South African skateboarding, Horowitz was at risk to be reduced to his confident handling of his sexual orientation instead of being valued for his achievements in skateboarding. Horowitz himself expressed that he had become tired of being sometimes reduced to the role of the spokesman for gay skateboarders (in South Africa), instead of being recognised as just another professional skateboarder like his heterosexual fellows.¹⁵⁰

Days earlier cited article therefore also implied that male heterosexuality continued to operate as an unspoken norm in skateboarding. In my observations among and conversations with South African skaters, male homosexuality was strangely absent and present at the same time. In most

¹⁵⁰ Mulgrew, Nick (13.11.2014): Yann-Xavier Horowitz Is Tired Of Being A Spokesman For Gay Skateboarders, Huck Magazine, online-source: <https://www.huckmag.com/perspectives/yann-xavier-horowitz-tired-spokesman-gay-skateboarders> [accessed: 8.9.2020].

skateboarding contexts, being gay was not an unencumbered circumstance, but something extraordinary, unusual and ‘abnormal’, often looked down upon and feared and loathed by some boys and (young) men. However, I emphasise here that this was not necessarily a specific feature of skateboarding, or that skateboarding culture, compared to other sports, was particularly homophobic. Rather, skateboarding did not seem to positively distinguish itself from homophobia in the wider world of sport and society, nor did it seem to confirm its self-imposed or ascribed progressive core in this regard. The price for many gay boys and men devoted to skateboarding has been that they have had to hide a significant aspect of their identity and lifestyle, their needs, desires, and wishes.

5 Approaching the rainbow nation: race and class in South African skateboarding

After having illuminated gender relations and masculinity, this chapter aims to engage the relevance of race and class in South African skateboarding. A central motivation for my research was to explore in what way a sport and youth culture like skateboarding tends to produce new social relations and identities transgressing societal divisions in the context of race and class. Around the time I started conceptualising my dissertation project in 2014, media reports and video documentaries on NGOs claiming to promote social integration and individual empowerment through emerged in greater numbers. According to the NGOs, skateboarding was particularly suited to ‘break down social barriers’, which was usually referring to racialised, class related and cultural inequalities and divisions in societies. In the context of South Africa, some of the qualities attributed to skateboarding were depicted as ideal for countering inequalities that were inherited from the apartheid past. The NGO Skateistan, for example, claimed to break “barriers to cultural, socioeconomic and ethnic understanding” through the sport, and spoke of skateboarding as a “tool to change society”¹⁵¹. Such statements clearly reminded of a typical narrative around supposed socially integrating effects of sport in South Africa in the sport for development and peace sector (Desai 2010: 1). Yet, some academics, authors and NGOs argued that skateboarding was, in comparison to other sports, particularly suited to achieve such effects. Architect and skateboarding expert Iain Borden claimed that skateboarding would “[transcend] class, religion and ethnicity” and

151 Skateistan (05.12.2017): Land Of Skate Explores How Skateboarding Is Breaking Barriers, Empowering Youth And Creating Community, boredpanda, online-source: <https://www.boredpanda.com/land-of-skate-explores-how-skateboarding-is-breaking-barriers-empowering-youth-and-creating-community> [accessed: 25.10.2021].

skaters would have “come from more varied backgrounds than occurs in traditional sports” (Borden 2019: 26). According to Borden, there were supposedly “relatively few racial tensions within skateboarding, and indeed many skaters have fully embraced a varied class and ethnic life” (Borden 2019: 28). If one believed such voices, skateboarding appeared to be a particularly tolerant and accessible sport in which social inequalities and power relations could be overcome with ease.

Such claims were contrasted with research that addressed the reproduction of race and class inequalities in and through skateboarding (and other alternative sports) (Butz 2012: 208; Dinces 2011: 1524; Dupont 2014: 15; Howell 2008: 485; Kusz 2003: 164; Schweer 2014: 105; Snyder 2017: 57; Yochim 2007: 222f.). According to this stream of thought, skateboarding never was a space free of discrimination and social inequalities, but also a site of their reproduction. A number of authors had critically highlighted the pronounced male dominance, sexism and homophobia in American and European skateboarding, and the relevance of racism, whiteness and class inequalities in the context of action sports (Kusz 2003 154f.; cf. Williams 2020: 32). However, the relevance of such inequalities in skateboarding was seldom addressed in depth in the academic debate (cf. Williams 2020: 32). A particularly important, recent contribution partly filling this gap was Neftalie Williams’ (2020) dissertation, who meticulously depicted the relevance of race and racism in US American skateboarding. However, Williams focused on the experiences of (former) professional athletes. Barely any studies had attempted a detailed analysis on the relevance of race and class outside professional spheres when I began my research endeavour. In this chapter, based on data gathered with ethnographic methods, I aim to contribute towards filling this gap by focusing on practices ‘on the ground’, as experienced, lived and perceived by beginner, amateur and professional skateboarders in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

Skateboarding’s public image was often not only oscillating between that of a somehow rebellious subculture, with skaters at times being stereotyped as outcasts or troublemakers, and a high performance sport, with skaters being seen as highly disciplined and success-focused individuals, but also between being a sport or subculture that was an exclusive affair of mostly White and class privileged boys and young men (cf. Yochim 2007: 142), particularly due to its historical development as I have demonstrated earlier, and being an integrated and tolerant social space where class marginalised and privileged boys and men of manifold social positions and identities came together (cf. Borden 2019: 26). In the course of this chapter I intend to explore the question of what kind of social space South African skateboarding was in the mirror of the contradictory (self-)representation of the sport and the subculture regards the relevance of race and class in more detail. I will look in depth at the potential socially integrative dynamics and effects in

skateboarding. Being an imagined international, masculine sport and subculture that was largely practised in urban public space, skateboarding did indeed carry specific potential for the promotion of social integration. To a certain degree, skateboarding culture was characterised by a vague ethos and value system in which discriminatory practices and attitudes referring to race, class, nationality and culture were firmly rejected, and in which tolerance, diversity and open-mindedness were celebrated. However, skateboarding was not decoupled from structures and inequalities of the wider society. As it turned out in my research, race and class inequalities of the wider society were reflected and reproduced in skateboarding, and not necessarily overcome. I will address three aspects that nurtured the reproduction of race and class related inequalities in South African skateboarding in more detail. First, I will illuminate how class inequalities impacted the opportunities, practices and social networks of skateboarders. In the South African context, class positions overlapped strongly with racialised positions in society, so I attempt to consider both social categories and their interrelations in the analysis. Second, I will have a closer look at the relevance of socio-spatial segregation in Cape Town and Johannesburg on the skateboarding scene. I demonstrate how residential segregation and the particular situation in different urban areas fueled the reproduction of race and class inequalities and segregation in the South African skateboarding scene. However, integrated spaces could develop under certain conditions, which I will illustrate by referring to two exemplary cases I encountered in Cape Town and Johannesburg. Thirdly, I will put the analytical lens on the economy of skateboarding in South Africa with a particular focus on professional skateboarding in Cape Town. Through this approach, I illustrate how racialised class inequalities were shaped, reproduced and countered in the subcultural economy, reflecting racialised class inequalities of the wider society and economy.

I have argued in the previous chapter that male skateboarders were not only connected by a passion for their sport and subculture, but also by a shared concept of masculinity. Even if in some regards there were divergent notions of what the lifestyle of a (male) skateboarder should and should not encompass, for example regarding the extent of the instrumentalisation of the body, the attitude towards sexism and homophobia, the relation of religion and sport, the willingness to cause damages to public and private property, and the legitimacy of (excessive) drug consumption as a part of skateboarding culture, pillars of street skateboarding, in particular the sportive practices involving a tough instrumentalisation of the body, and the extensive use of and the challenging of risks in urban public space, connected athletes through a shared notion of a masculine identity. Similar to other youth cultures and sports, this created the potential for the building of social connections among boys and men that transgressed societal divisions as their common denominator

was their sportive and subcultural passion with the shared gender identity acquired and performed. The depiction and understanding of skateboarding as an activity characterised by race and class diversity of its practitioners was quite prominent when I started my research. Particularly companies in the skateboarding industry, NGOs, individual activists and some academics promoting the sport in ‘sport for peace and development’-contexts were disseminating this image in the public sphere (cf. Fitzpatrick 2012: 121, 136; Snyder 2012: 314). Dani Abulhawa exemplified this depiction of skateboarding and (NGO-)activism promoting the sport:

“What we [skateboarding activists] are advocating for is radical openness, inclusivity, and generosity from one skateboarder to another, within the skateboarding industry, and within broader social academic structures [...]” (Abulhawa 2020: 108)

A number of skateboarding activists and academics suggested that skateboarding would outperform other sports regarding the creation of socially diverse spaces and facilitation of social integration (cf. Borden 2019: 26). Skaters were implicitly declared by such voices to be emancipatory actors. In the South African context the sport was supposedly able to nurture the ‘rainbow nation’ by helping to overcome the race, class and ethnic divisions inherited from the apartheid era, as a number of NGOs and activists claimed during the time I was conducting fieldwork. Repeatedly, I was told in interviews that skateboarding would “break down the barriers of race, sex and age”. Indeed, what seemed characteristic and immediately visible in street skateboarding was that it appealed to boys and young men who occupied very different class positions in society. Skateboarding’s position between sport and urban youth culture in particular made it capable of connecting to different social spheres, especially since it had begun to increasingly shed its connotation as an activity of class privileged, White suburbanians and had become much more accessible. Skateboarding was certainly adaptable, and was as much at home in clinically clean streets of affluent suburbs as in chaotic urban canyons of a metropolis. And wherever it was practised, it seemed to be publicly received with similar ambivalence between recognition and disapproval, coolness and ridicule.

The self-understanding to be part of a socially diverse subculture was indeed widespread among skateboarders I met during my fieldwork in South Africa. There seemed to exist a vague notion of a progressive core or ethos of skateboarding involving not only the practical, sportive aspects, but social aspects as well, especially in connection with the valuation of individuality and ‘creative self-expression’ (Borden 2019: 26).¹⁵² Among skaters the perception was quite widespread that

152 Pappalardo, Anthony (27.12.2019): Skateboarding is not progressive: poking holes in perception, Artless, online-source: <https://anthonypappalardo.substack.com/p/skateboarding-is-not-progressive> [accessed: 15.11.2022].

skateboarding would tend to attract open minded individuals that rejected forms of discrimination especially referring to race, class, ethnicity and nationality. According to the Coloured skateboarding veterans Errol Strachan and Arnold 'Arnie' Lambert, even during the late apartheid-era racism supposedly had no space in skateboarding, as they emphasised in an interview, and this had not changed according to their observations:

Lambert: [Addressing Strachan] But tell him that it was open back then already, yeah, the competitions.

Strachan: Ya, ya, ahm, the thing about, are you referring to the race thing?

Lambert: Hmm.

Strachan: There wasn't a race in skateboarding, we never saw that. You know, just like, even when I was, before him, like in the 70s, I used to skate at Muizenberg and all the guys come and skate with me, no problem. [...] And then, same with when I started skating with Arnie, you know, I noticed that the kids don't, they don't have like any reservations about race, they just skate, you know, skateboarding is like very much a soul sport. You know, it is a soul sport, so it's just you and your board, and everyone recognised that talent in each other.

Interviewer: I see.

Strachan: Skaters are still the same, I noticed in the competition, like I was watching [...] I am glad to see that the spirit of skateboarding is still the same.

Interviewer: Would you say like there were things that changed in skateboarding with the transformation? Were like certain things different after apartheid?

Strachan: No, no, everything was the same, there was none, none of that shit actually came into, into skateboarding at all. At that time when we were skating it was non-racial, there was no, no race or anything. And it was White against Black. We didn't see that, no one saw that as long as your were a good person.

These remarks did not imply that skateboarders were blind to the social differences that affected their lives, especially when it came to daily realities outside of the subcultural context. What Strachan and Lambert emphasised in the interview rather signified that practically created subcultural affiliation carried considerable weight in building a basic sense of belonging and togetherness among male street skateboarders that could be spontaneously and informally mobilised. Both had indeed built manifold acquaintances through skateboarding in Cape Town in the 1970s and 1980s and, like their White acquaintances on the other side of town, recurrently

transgressed state-enforced group areas when meeting to skate certain urban spaces or visit each other at home. Feeling part of a global, imagined community of urban rebels, who were despised by the mainstream society, could facilitate social ties among skaters of radically different social positions who regarded each other as equal members of the same sportive culture, subculture or 'brotherhood' (cf. Dinces 2012: 314; Peters 2016: 222f.; Snyder 2017: 12ff.). Despite having become a much more accepted activity, skateboarding still clearly possessed the potential to make athletes feel as members of a community of outcasts and rebels in the late 2010s. Moreover, it was the succinct fact that skaters were united by the shared joys and sufferings that resulted from physical practice that created a sense of camaraderie (cf. Peters 2016: 221). I often heard that the practical experiences all skaters shared pushed social differences among them into the background, as Corbin, for example, pointed out:

Corbin: With skating it's kinda cool, it brings people together from all different spheres of life. We interact with a lot of people, but we do see like the difference between the different people. But the one thing that unites us is pretty strong and we all have a love for it, so that's the bottom line at the end of it. Even though trends come along, like, some things become more important than others, or more revered. It's just about skating at the end of the day, and like as much other stuff that is going around, the only difference makes the actual skating, when you are on the board skating.

Interviewer: Ok, I see.

Corbin: I hear it somewhere that, what do you call skating? It's just an act, it's just, that's all it is. When you in it, when you are on it, acting on it, that's as much as you gonna get from it. It'll give you so much more, emotionally and mentally, and stuff like that, but there is no difference between me and the next skater. That might be an older guy, that might be a younger guy, age plays a difference, background as I said, and, you know, just like, all these things, seek to like make us different and stuff. The only thing that makes us all the same again is, if we get on our boards, and we are all skating. The act, purely, physically, just the act of skating that brings that good feeling and that enjoyment.

The lived experience of a niche sport was undoubtedly a central moment in establishing a sense of commonality. Skateboarding was more than mere practice on a wooden board, even if it boiled down to being exactly that at times. For many skaters skateboarding was a lifestyle, a commitment that consumed much of their free time and structured much of their lives. Regardless of their respective social positions, all skateboarders knew the joys and hardships of the physical activity, constantly looking out for interesting architecture when travelling (the 'skater's gaze'), being chased and confronted by security, police and criminals, being met with a lack of understanding or

even ridiculed by relationship partners, family members and strangers in public, the joy of watching skate videos and reading magazines, chilling in skate shops, the ‘magic moment’ of assembling a new skateboard and riding ‘fresh gear’, and many other aspects that were constitutive of a skateboarder’s life. Skateboarding shaped a certain view of the world that came primarily from practical experience and that could only be understood if one had made these practical experiences oneself (Borden 2001: 138, 165; Dupont 2014: 15; Peters 2016: 171f.). The shared lifestyle and practical experiences contributed towards the creation of a vague, felt connection and mutual recognition among the skaters.

Moreover, a form of subcultural solidarity was nurtured by the small size of the skateboarding scene in South Africa, which was truly tiny compared to those in North America and Western Europe. Without a doubt, street skateboarding was a niche sport compared to, for example, football and rugby. Especially among the advanced street skateboarders from the big cities, most seemed to know each other personally. Due to the generally small number of skaters, it was advisable to be not so picky in building connections to other skateboarders if one was looking for good company. This seemed to stand in contrast to mainstream sports where the number of potential players was large and thus the possibility of finding players of similar social positions or in one’s residential area much larger.¹⁵³ This was especially apparent in the case of skaters who had grown up in neighbourhoods or small towns where the number of skaters could be sometimes counted on one hand. While there was no guarantee that skaters would get along with each other under such circumstances simply for being invested in the same activity, the building of social relationships and the formation of crews was certainly favoured. After all, it was a good idea to get involved with other skateboarders for practical reasons alone, to find company, support and safety on skate adventures in the city. The fact that certain places were suitable as skate spots due to their architectural qualities also ensured that skaters inevitably bumped into each other. Facilitated by these practical aspects, friendship circles or skate crews formed between boys and young men who shared an interest in the sport, but who otherwise had not necessarily much in common in terms of their general lifestyles or living situations. That skateboarding brought one in touch with people of

¹⁵³ During my time in Cape Town, for example, I occasionally played recreational football with spontaneously formed teams on the promenade in Sea Point, Cape Town. I was recurrently amazed to see that two separate games were often played there right next to each other. Usually I could choose to play a game with class privileged South Africans and foreigners, or with working class men who played a game after work before returning home to the outskirts of the city. Both groups were also racialised: While the class privileged side was relatively mixed, with a high proportion of White players, the game of the class marginalised players was almost exclusively composed of Black and Coloured men. Both groups did rarely mix and they seemed to have no incentive to do so, as there were usually more than enough players present for each match (or could spontaneously be recruited from the surrounding). The high popularity and thus number of active players seemed to allow the ‘luxury’ of being choosy in the selection of teammates, and so players seemed to come together who shared similarities, particularly in terms of their class position and professional background. This was often less the case in skateboarding.

different social backgrounds was recurrently emphasised by skaters in interviews. When I spoke to Joel about his experiences among street skateboarders in Johannesburg and Cape Town, he emphasised the unifying effect of skateboarding across divisions of race and class:

Joel: You will see like dudes congregating on that basis of like ‘this is our mentality, and this is the people we choose to be with, so we gonna stick together, but we all share this common thing of skateboarding’. ‘Cause there is so many different, you still stay an individual, it doesn’t change your personality. It may change your mentality, but not your personality. So like there is never an atmosphere of people being different and like feeling like, in terms of class and in terms of race.

At skate spots and in skateparks, skateboarders tended to recognise each other as part of the same imagined community, and approached each other with a loose sense of mutual respect and camaraderie even if they were strangers. Successful manoeuvres of other athletes in parks or at spots were applauded, struggling skaters were built up or given tips, help was offered in case of injuries and sometimes drinks, food and cigarettes were shared. And even if there were no narrowly defined dress codes among skaters, there were characteristic elements of skater fashion and clothing, such as specific shoes (skate shoes), clothing of certain brands, materials and shapes, which visually underlined the affiliation to the community of skateboarders. During my field research, I recurrently experienced the reassuring feeling of meeting other skateboarders ‘in the wild’ on my trips with informants in Cape Town and Johannesburg. Even if no closer social or emotional connection was given, the shared identification as skateboarders created an immediate sense of basic, mutual sympathy. Being a skateboarder almost automatically made one a member of a largely informal, global community. Recurrently, skaters told me how they could often effortlessly connect with other skaters while travelling, based almost solely on the mutual recognition as skaters. The fact that this was meaningful in the risky public spaces in South Africa, as meeting other skateboarders as a skateboarder was never a source of fear, but always a source of recognition and basic solidarity, became evident during the extensive time I spent with the urban athletes on their missions and was emphasised by numerous informants in conversations, like Brian:

Brian: We know we have a safe space where our community is gonna be, that is where we will travel to go there. I see skateboarding like separate from race. It is the one thing where all things become equal. You know what I mean? Because no matter whether someone buys you a skateboard, or someone gives you a skateboard or you stole skateboard, you can still interact in terms of like who can do a kickflip, who can 50-50 that ledge, it doesn’t matter where your board comes from, you are there and have your

board, how are you gonna use it. And that's like the great equaliser of like all people, you know what I mean. And so, ya, the street spots, we all get chased away from them.

The imagined community was practically lived and felt by skateboarders, and certainly helped to bridge national divides. Skaters from North America, Western Europe and other African countries visiting Cape Town and Johannesburg for various reasons often had no difficulties to build ties to local skateboarders. The other way around, South African skateboarders explained to me that they could often connect very quickly with foreign skateboarders when spending time abroad and therefore easily cultivate international networks. In this context, former professional South African skateboarder Yusuf emphasised his ability to quickly knit connections through skateboarding when he went to Great Britain for the first time:

Yusuf: The first time I left the country I went to London with my wife. But we were just dating at the time. And she, she is from there so she knew lots of people there, her sister was staying there. And in the first two weeks we had a fight, we broke up. She is like 'get out! get out!', you know!?

Interviewer: Damn.

Yusuf: So I took all my shit and left. And I had a daypack and a backpack and she was like 'where are you going with all your stuff?'. And I was like 'I don't know'. But I took my stuff and left and went to a skatepark. And within half an hour I met skateboarders who were like 'Hey, come stay at my house!'

Interviewer: Ok, wow.

Yusuf: I went to their house and spent the next two weeks just travelling around and saw the whole of England. I got a job selling paintball-tickets, I made some money and at the end of the last two weeks, because we had a ticket that we shared coming to London and we had to go back the same way. So we hooked up again and when I came back I had all these things that I had bought and stories, I went here and I went there, and my wife was like 'why didn't you tell me?'. 'Hey man, you threw me out of the house!'

Referencing Goffman's approach towards social effects of shared play experiences, one could potentially identify the 'rules of irrelevance' in skateboarding taking effect. According to Goffman, social differences and inequalities of the participants characteristically recede into the background in playful social encounters. The rules of the game temporarily lever out social hierarchies and the everyday order of interaction, so to speak, and thus allow the participants to develop new relationships to each other within the framework of the game (Goffman 1972: 20). During the

countless skateboarding sessions I witnessed, this often seemed to be the case: In the context of skateboarding, children, young people and adults came into contact with each other, some of whom had not much else in common than a shared interest in skateboarding. Practised skateboarding provided a framework for smooth social interaction between skaters of very different social backgrounds. One didn't even have to speak the same language to engage in skateboarding with others, because the sport provided its own, internationally known language. For many skaters, the sport represented a separate sphere that was not necessarily to be connected with the wider society. The liberating effect of playful interaction became particularly visible when social hierarchies were turned upside down, for example when young skaters taught much older beginners certain tricks. Many skaters appreciated this 'levelled playing field' and favoured that 'political issues' affecting the wider society are not brought into skateboarding. Similar to the boxers in Chicago Wacquant had joined, sociability in Simmel's sense could evolve and the social interaction was freed from some of the weight of the inequalities, divisions and power relations of the 'real world' (Wacquant 2004: 37f.). Acquaintances and friendships between skaters thus resulted not only from a vague subcultural identification, but also quite practically from the playful quality of the sport and its socialising effects promoted by the framework of playful interaction.

As argued before, the connecting effects in skateboarding that pushed social divisions into the background were partly attributable to the fact that practitioners shared a subcultural masculine identity. Street skateboarding was not just a sport or subculture and community of practice, but more specifically a community of boys and men, and a space where they could experience and appropriate masculinity, and mutually recognise each other as members of a global community of (young) men (cf. Connell/Messerschmidt 2005: 851; Wacquant 2004: 68). This rendered skateboarding a loose solidarity community, a 'brotherhood', that connected primarily boys and men from a potentially wide spectrum of social positions (cf. Williams 2020: 191f.). In this respect, sport and subculture did have a certain potential for promoting diverse social networks, and creating race and class diverse social spaces among boys and men, which was quite visible in certain skateparks and at certain skate spots.

Yet, despite the existence of diverse skateboarding spaces and social networks, and the widespread opinion among skateboarders that in their sport and subculture 'politics' are excluded, and inequalities and forms of discrimination found in the wider society are largely irrelevant, the reproduction of social divisions and inequalities played a visible role. In the previous chapter I already discussed the impact and production of gender inequalities in skateboarding. In the next section, I will show how structural inequalities and more direct forms of discrimination, which

mainly referred to race and class, further complicated subcultural communitarianisation. In particular, inequalities along race and class divisions were only partially irrelevant or overcome in skateboarding, but also reproduced and debated within the subculture.

5.1 Not a cheap sport: costs, accessibility and class in skateboarding

In capitalist societies where access to resources, whether housing, mobility, education, health care and leisure, is dependent on the availability of economic capital, class inequalities play a central role in determining the lifestyle-choices of individuals. As Bourdieu (1987: 332f.) had demonstrated, sports were prominent playing fields for the (re)production and expression of class inequalities and associated lifestyles (cf. Dunning 1999: 84). In racialised class societies, class and race related distinctions overlap strongly and can hardly be separated from each other (cf. Hall 1994: 92; Hall 2002: 55). This also and in particular affects the world of sport (Jarvie 2011: 98). In South Africa, sport had historically developed pronounced, overlapping race and class divisions, and was employed by the colonial and apartheid state to express and shape supposed race and class related characteristics (Bale/Cronin 2003: 7f.; Besnier/Brownell 2012: 447; cf. Desai et. al. 2002: 123; Mills/Dimeo 2003: 119). While some sports, such as rugby, had been historically constituted as playing fields of class privileged Whites (Desai 2010: 7), other sports, such as football, developed particularly high popularity among Black and Coloured South Africans (Alegi 2004: 21; Farred 2003: 124f.). Even though the demographic composition of the South African sport landscape had become more diverse in past decades, race and class inequalities and divisions were still clearly present in the late 2010s. Alongside the ‘general inertia’ of social and socio-cultural relations and realities, this was caused by traditions, techniques, norms and ideals, and infrastructural and institutional structures that had developed over time, which favoured or hindered the practice of certain sports in certain social contexts (Bourdieu 1987: 333f.). Furthermore, political and economic factors played an important role (Bourdieu 1987: 338f.; Desai et. al. 2002: 16; Farred 2003:124, 138). Expensive sports requiring costly infrastructure and equipment, and a large investment of time, such as golf, paragliding, sailing and motor racing, for example, had not coincidentally remained playing grounds of wealthy South Africans, among whom Whites were still overrepresented (cf. Bourdieu 1987: 345). The poor majority of colour was unable to access such sports due to a lack of resources, which explained the social connotation of these sports as both class privileged and White, an association that was characteristic in the South African context and

mirroring the wider realities in the racialised class society (Abraham 2017: 105; cf. Bourdieu 1987: 334). The enormous popularity of football and its (changing) connotation as a working class sport was in turn related to its flexibility and low costs, as the sport hardly demands any specific infrastructure and can be played with affordable equipment. In order to better understand the demographic composition of a sport in a capitalist class society, it is consequently helpful to determine its accessibility which is largely linked to the necessary economic resources required to practice a sport on a regular basis and in the long-term (Besnier/Brownell/Carter 2017: 102).

Skateboarding was sometime said to be a particularly class and race diverse social space, with one important factor promoting social diversity being its affordability (Borden 2001: 140; Borden 2019: 26). The reasons usually given for this are that skateboarding requires little equipment, only a board and shoes are essential, and the initial costs for the equipment are relatively low, for example compared to BMX, road biking or surfing. In addition, street skateboarding does not require any special sports facilities to practise, it can simply be performed in urban public spaces at low cost. There is certainly some truth to this depiction and skateboarding can surely be practised with few resources in some way. I quickly realised during my research that skateboarding could be regarded relatively affordable in the context of North America and Western Europe, where gear was comparably affordable and skateable architecture easily accessible in most bigger cities. But in South Africa, where a large part of the population was living in deep poverty and skateboarding infrastructure was much less established, skateboarding was comparatively costly. Contrary to what was sometimes publicly stated by skateboarders, skateboard companies, NGOs and some academics (cf. Borden 2019: 26), skateboarding was a quite expensive activity compared to mainstream sports like football, rugby and cricket, especially when regarding long-term participation (Dupont 2014: 14). I will discuss the various reasons for this in more detail below.

The costs for skateboarding are unavoidably comparatively high due to skateboarding being an individual sport requiring special equipment and gear, and access to spaces with particular properties. In terms of the spaces required, skateboarding is, in a sense, not very flexible as it can only be performed on surfaces that are hard and smooth, and in specific architectural environments.¹⁵⁴ For example, the sport can be practised only within limits in rural areas and marginalised neighbourhoods where there are few asphalted, concreted and paved surfaces. Consequently, skateboarding requires mobility, the significance and implications of which I will

¹⁵⁴ It is precisely because of the low flexibility of skateboarding that only very specific locations develop into skate spots, while in other places the formation of spots is impossible due to infrastructural and architectural conditions. In the context of affluent Western societies and their sophisticated urban and rural spaces, the possibilities of skateboarding may seem limitless, but in the context of urban and rural spaces in South Africa, they definitely were not.

discuss later. Foremost, however, it is the necessary equipment that makes the sport expensive. As an individual activity, pooling and sharing equipment and gear needed to engage in the activity is hardly possible. In comparison to team sports, every skater needs his or her own set of equipment.¹⁵⁵ Whereas in many mainstream sports the means of play can also often be improvised to a degree, for example in football any ball can be used as a surrogate for a proper football, a backyard or a pitch of grass can be used as a playfield and goals can be marked with random objects, such improvisation is much less possible in (street) skateboarding. A skateboard has to meet quite specific requirements regarding dimensions, shape and materials to be suitable for street skateboarding. It is hardly possible to improvise or build a skateboard by oneself, because, for example, the deck must be made of a specific plywood with the right amount of flexibility and hardness.¹⁵⁶ A deck made of hard plastic, carbon or an unsuitable wood, for example, can render the execution of certain tricks and manoeuvres much more difficult or even impossible. Similarly, other components of a skateboard, especially the trucks and wheels, are very specific parts. A relatively small number of companies produced quality skate equipment and gear which, in consequence, tended to be rather expensive. The costs for skateboarding equipment in South Africa were further driven up by the fact that the majority of it was not produced locally, but was largely imported from North America, Western Europe and China.¹⁵⁷

In addition, the necessary expenses for street skateboarding are massively driven up by costs resulting in the long-term, in particular due to the fact that equipment and shoes are subject to a lot of wear and tear, and have to be replaced regularly (Dupont 2014: 14). While equipment in skateboarding styles like sidewalk surfing, vert skateboarding and longboarding can last a longer time, street skateboarding is a deterioration sport that constantly wears the equipment, shoes and clothing (and architectural environment) (Borden 2001: 158).¹⁵⁸ According to my conservative

155 In theory, it was possible for two or three people to share a board when visiting a skatepark or skate spot.

Practically, however, it meant that none of the participants could practise in a focused and concentrated way, because when taking turns, breaks had to be taken again and again. Accordingly, sharing boards did play no role among dedicated skaters. It was an unspoken law that every ambitious skater used his own equipment.

156 I met skaters in Cape Town who had tried making their own decks to cut costs for themselves and make some money selling them. However, they had abandoned the project after a short time, as the production of suitable decks was much more difficult than they had expected, and suitable wood would have had to be imported at great expense.

157 The few South African companies that sold skateboard decks, for example, imported them and only printed their brand names on the products locally, I was told. Suitable woods for the production of decks were not available in South Africa, but in the northern hemisphere, like Canadian maple. Local deck production was therefore difficult to realise. Overall, skateboarding equipment seemed to be so specific and the consumer market so small that hardly any companies were found for local production. The world of skateboard products was in the hands of a relatively small number of international corporates. Consequently, acquiring quality equipment was a rather costly affair, especially during times of weakness of the South African Rand importing quality gear was not cheap.

158 This seemed to be one reason why a vivid local economy had developed around street skateboarding, but less so around other skateboarding styles. The crucial difference was that in many other styles, such as flatland longboarding, freestyle and also vert skateboarding, the equipment lasted much longer. Companies could only

calculations, one year of intensive street skateboarding required an investment of about R3850 for the equipment alone (about R321 per month).¹⁵⁹ The necessary expenses could be significantly higher, depending on the riding style, quality of the equipment used, architecture that was approached and environmental conditions. To get a more objective picture of the affordability of skateboarding in South Africa, I related the estimated costs to available statistical data on disposable income. According to Maluleke, in 2015, Black South African households had an annual median expenditure of R9186 (R818 per month) per capita, compared to an annual median expenditure of R100205 (R8350 per month) per capita among White South African households. The median yearly per capita expenditure of households in urban areas was on average R17193 (R1433 per month) (Maluleke 2019: 27f.). If one believes the numbers from Maluleke's report, the costs for skateboarding of a single individual constituted almost one fourth of the median expenditure. Relative to the figures for Black households, this was almost 39.22% and for White households only about 3.84% of the average expenditure per capita. This implies that skateboarding was certainly hardly affordable for a large part of the South African population. In racialised class society, however, skateboarding continued to be a cheap leisure activity for the majority of White South Africans. That the sport was often still thought of as a White middle class pastime makes immediate sense from this point of view. This calculation, however, only took into account the equipment, whereby, as I will show later, additional emergent costs, such as those related to access to mobility and place of residence, raised the barriers to accessing the sport even further.

In my fieldwork, it quickly became apparent that especially households in marginalised neighbourhoods rarely had the means to afford skateboarding equipment and gear as skateparks in such neighbourhoods often remained unused. A visible symptom that the sport was not affordable for many South Africans. Certainly, the equipment costs were heavily affecting the demographics of South African skateboarding. In South Africa's racialised class society in which the White minority

achieve a comparatively low turnover with such products. I got to know two local, small longboard manufacturers in my field research in Cape Town. In both cases, the big challenge was to generate continuous sales. The problem, after all, was that customers who bought a longboard often went years without a replacement. That was a fundamental difference from shops selling street skateboarding equipment which were regularly visited by the same skateboarders who needed replacement for worn gear and formed a consistent consumer base.

159 For this calculation I assumed that on average a (blank) street skateboard deck (~ R600) has to be replaced every 4, wheels (~R500) every 12, trucks (~R600) every 24, skate shoes (~R500) every 6 and bearings (~R250) every 12 months. I have based my calculation on the prices for decent and reasonably priced entry level equipment in 2017. The calculated expenses do not include transportation costs and entrance fees for skateparks and events, which add another considerable expense to the sport. The costs could be partially reduced by purchasing used or particularly cheap equipment. Yet, the costs could also be much higher in practice depending on how often skaters exercise, the style of skateboarding performed, the quality of the equipment used and so on. For some skateboarders a deck would only last a month or even less, bearings could be quickly ruined when ridden in wet conditions and trucks damaged after a few months of grinding on rough concrete obstacles. If a skater was unlucky, a deck could break in a single trick attempt, for instance when landing from a great height. The costs I calculated conservatively could thus quickly double.

remained largely economically privileged and the Black majority largely economically precarious, with Coloured and Indian South Africans structurally situated in between, skateboarding was predestined to develop a skewed demographic composition. Although skateboarding had become more race and class diverse and White South Africans did not form the majority of the skateboarding population anymore, White middle class athletes were still overrepresented, especially due to their privileged access to capital, infrastructure and mobility. Skateboarding had developed as a game and sport of the middle and upper classes, and even though accessibility had improved, it had not comprehensively shed this tendency.

5.1.1 The impact of class on skaters' experiences and opportunities

Nevertheless, skateboarding had developed into a social space with visible race and class diversity among its practitioners, particularly since the 2000s and 2010s. I have illustrated this development in the chapter on the historical development of the sport. Athletes of colour clearly formed the majority of skateboarders when I was conducting fieldwork in the late 2010s. Moreover, athletes from working class backgrounds had increasingly entered the arena and competed successfully in the professional sphere. However, social inequalities increasingly emerged within the sport itself. Affluent and poor skaters faced clearly different challenges, with the former being privileged and the latter being disadvantaged in various ways. In the following, I will go into more detail about the extent to which class inequalities among skaters had a practical impact. The fundamental difference between class privileged and class marginalised skaters was that the former were able to participate in the sport with ease, while the latter had to constantly overcome additional hurdles and obstacles in various ways that made it much more difficult for them to easily participate in the sport.

The biggest challenge for poor skaters was certainly to keep the expenses for the equipment at bay. As I have previously illustrated, skaters relied on special equipment that was not cheap and wore out relatively quickly. With various strategies, the necessary expenses could be reduced. The most evident option was to use equipment until it literally fell apart. This meant for example that skateboard decks were used even if cracked or when parts had chipped off, bearings were still used when not turning perfectly anymore or having become rusty, and wheels were ridden even if cracked or largely worn away. In skateparks in poor neighbourhoods in the Cape Flats, I regularly met kids and teenagers whose decks were so worn out that they had practically no nose or tail left. On these boards, certain tricks were barely executable, but they were still better than nothing. So-called blank decks, unbranded skateboard decks, were quite popular among poor skateboarders as they were slightly cheaper than branded ones, but also said to be of lesser quality. For other

components, too, it was possible to choose cheap products instead of expensive branded gear, but often with drawbacks in terms of quality and durability. Poor skaters would sometimes buy used equipment from wealthier skaters, that was still somehow useable but not ‘fresh’ according to the standards of the better-off athletes, and saved some cash this way. Obviously, used equipment that other skaters resold had already suffered damage and wear and tear, limiting usability and durability. Skating used and handed-down equipment was therefore hardly a viable option.

Another significant expense in skateboarding is resulting from shoe and clothing wear. Shoes in particular are heavily worn and rarely last more than 1 or 2 months with intensive street skateboarding. Simultaneously, skaters usually do not use just any shoes, but attach importance to special skate shoes offering increased board control and protection from injuries due to their special design featuring a reinforced upper material and toe box enhancing durability. Unsuitable shoes that have a thin upper material, for example, will be ruined by skateboarding in no time. Skaters on a small budget could not necessarily do much about the costs coming with shoe wear and tear than trying to wear cheap, suitable shoes, buy shoes when on sale and models that were known to last long. But since even that was not always possible, I recurrently met skateboarders from poor households who practised in unsuitable shoes and accepted the corresponding disadvantages. Even top professional Moses Adams, who had grown up in poverty in Atlantis, had started skateboarding in inexpensive school shoes as a child and wore his first proper skate shoes only years later when he could afford them.¹⁶⁰ Extending the lifespan of valuable skate shoes was hardly possible, yet, some skaters applied layers of glue (‘shoe goo’) to the stressed part of their shoes to make them last longer or patch holes, although this ruined the look of a shoe and brought only a limited extension of the lifespan. Admittedly, some children and young people rode barefoot, something I even observed in a number of skateboarding NGOs (although most NGOs provided shoes to participants). This was always the result of kids, or rather their families, not being able to afford shoes. However, this increased the risk of injury considerably, as shoes offered protection to the feet, and it was impossible to perform proper street skateboarding barefoot, as the support of shoes was required for most of the tricks. For ambitious skaters, the right shoes were without alternative. Accordingly, a considerable cost factor in skateboarding results from the wear and tear on the shoes that the sport brought. This represented the biggest cost factor next to the actual skateboard, especially in the long term.

160 Ruiters, Tracy-Lynn (16.01.2022): Cape pro skateboarder’s name immortalised on a board, Independent Online, online-source: <https://www.iol.co.za/weekend-argus/entertainment/cape-pro-skateboarders-name-immortalised-on-a-board-20c0e485-4050-4cb0-9bc5-9bc78de2e7dd> [accessed: 16.01.2022].

The cost of clothing is less significant, as skaters usually do not attach increased importance to specific functional wear. Clothing for skateboarding must restrict movement as little as possible and must have a certain robustness, especially against abrasion. Frequent falls can contribute to the faster wear of clothes, but this is negligible compared to the wear of shoes. Skaters with little income often chose clothing pragmatically and wore it until it fell apart, or patched holes in trousers and jumpers provisionally. Yet, it was important to many South African skaters to wear fashionable clothes and appear freshly dressed – especially on film and video shoots, attention was often paid to new-looking, branded clothing. In terms of clothing, low-income skaters predominantly faced a fashion problem. As in wider society, one could approximately tell by the look of skaters and their gear what class backgrounds athletes had. Protectors for knees, elbows and wrists as well as helmets could be mentioned at this point, but the majority of (street) skateboarders did without them. Yet, in various respects, street skateboarding involved the heavy wear and tear of the gear used. While the one-time or initial purchase of gear makes the sport seem cheap at first, it is the long-term costs of high wear and tear that cause the true financial burden of the sport.

The financial burdens linked to acquisition and maintenance costs caused direct practical inequalities among skaters. Skaters from affluent households were clearly privileged because they could afford high quality gear and its maintenance usually without problems, and therefore practice on ‘fresh’ equipment most of the time. Practising on cheap, worn and damaged equipment brought significant disadvantages. It made it difficult to perform well, and it increased the risk of falls and injuries. Some manoeuvres were much harder or impossible to perform on flawed equipment. For example, every now and then I came across children in poor neighbourhoods who rode skateboards with badly worn or non-existent grip tape. On such boards, certain flips were hardly executable and landings were difficult to control on the slippery deck. In general, with such boards there was a danger of slipping off the board during simple manoeuvres and losing control. Cheap and damaged decks lacked flexibility and ‘pop’, which made it difficult to ollie high and perform certain tricks. Old bearings could slow down or even suddenly jam due to wear or rust. In general, not being able to practise on new and well maintained gear brought manifold disadvantages and additional risks. Moreover, being able to practise on ‘fresh’ equipment allowed maximising the training effect as it maintained a consistent feeling. Professional skaters in particular therefore replaced their equipment sooner rather than later.

But the most profound class inequality directly affecting skateboarding as a practise was undoubtedly that poor skaters would at times have to stop pursuing their passion purely due to a lack of economic capital to replace worn out boards and parts. Sometimes there just wasn’t the

money to buy new bearings or a new deck, and a break from training for a couple weeks or months was the only alternative when an essential part of the equipment was broken and could not be replaced. The worst case was, of course, when a skateboard was stolen. While skaters from wealthy households usually had no problems at all in getting replacements and continuing their passion without interruption, I repeatedly encountered the problem, especially among poorer children and young people, that longer breaks had to be taken until the longed-for replacement could be obtained. Accordingly, at times there was begging at skate spots and in skateparks when young skaters of class marginalised backgrounds were looking for material support from other skaters in the absence of alternatives.

In many ways, class marginalised individuals practised under much more difficult circumstances, plus the general conditions they were living under were more burdensome and dangerous, and therefore caused additional challenges to engage in the sport consistently. The sacrifices made for skateboarding could be considerable for low-income athletes. That these sacrifices were an essential difference from the perspective of class marginalised skateboarders compared to those from affluent households was underlined, for example, by a facebook post of the skate crew 20sk8:

“What do you know about having to skate 2nd hand boards your whole life, different hangers and base plates of trucks, 4 different wheel bearings always breaking, skating in your shoes till your feet bleed. The privilege life never made us, being under privilege did and we thankful AF!!!”¹⁶¹

In fact, a number of NGOs had formed in the country to specifically support class marginalised children and youth by providing equipment, mentoring and, in some cases, facilities, to enable them to engage in skateboarding. Precisely because skateboarding was not particularly cheap, some children and young people were only able to engage in the sport when attending NGO programs (cf. Abraham 2017: 105). In Hillbrow, Johannesburg, for example, the NGO One Love Skateboarding was active with exactly this intention. The activists of the NGO aimed to enable skaters of marginalised class backgrounds in the neighbourhood to train with at least comparable equipment to that of class privileged skateboarders elsewhere, as activist Joel explained to me:

Joel: So ya, originally it just pretty much started out with us just kinda like bringing the ramps there and just having a place for kids to skate. And then hooking up skate

161 Twenty Skeight (02.11.2017): What do you know about having to skate 2nd hand boards your whole life, facebook, online-source: <https://www.facebook.com/twentykskeight/photos/a.203214583110115/1457229357708625/> [accessed: 23.02.2018].

equipment whenever we could for them to skate. But then otherwise it was more about just kinda like, I guess, providing a facility and making it easier for these kids. Just making it easier for them to be able to skate in general. But then to be able to do something with skateboarding. Because it also became that thing of like, so as a result of these kids not having all of this nice shit, now it's like they are not getting as good as all of these other kids that had these nice skateparks and nice boards, and fucking all of that shit, dude. 'Cause it's hard, skateboarding is hard in itself, but it's even harder when you don't have the proper equipment.

Interviewer: Ya. When your board is broken.

Joel: Yeah, when your board is broken, your bearings are popping, your wheels are this small [forming a small circle with his fingers].

Interviewer: True.

Joel: Even the place you are skating is just so rough and raggedy, every single time you fall it just breaks it more, a big ass chunk of your board, you know. It's like, and this is how these kids are skating, whatever the fuck they can find. I came, like, I know exactly, I have seen what I am seeing, because when I was like their age and I was skating, it was not that hard.

Class marginalised skateboarders found ways to live out the sport despite economic precariousness, but no doubt the detours and extra journeys they had to take were an extra burden class privileged skateboarders were often not aware of. The experience of skateboarders of different class backgrounds could therefore differ considerably. Especially among the class marginalised skateboarders, there were athletes with great passion who were really willing to make bigger sacrifices for the practice of the sport. Precisely because the sport was relatively expensive, there was often little money left for other activities if they took it seriously. Ambitious class marginalised skaters had often made the decision to commit to skateboarding but no other activity, while class privileged skateboarders were able to take up and put down the sport much more easily, and pursue other hobbies on the side because they had the economic means to do so.¹⁶² Especially among class marginalised (young) men, it seemed to me, I encountered hardcore skateboarders who had had to fight for skateboarding in their lives and for whom it had a correspondingly high value.

Despite the socially inclusive tendencies of skateboarding, the different worlds of experience and perceived value of equipment and other necessities could lead to tensions and conflicts when skaters of different class backgrounds encountered each other in shared skate spaces, and realised and experienced each other's highly divergent opportunities in society. While for one athlete a

¹⁶² Skaters from privileged classes often engaged in numerous other, cost-intensive hobbies in their free time, which was possible for them because of the economic capital and leisure time available.

skateboard could be a negligible investment, for another the same piece of equipment ended up being a valuable asset. The banal conflicts of everyday life in a class society were therefore acted out within the sport and subculture. Based on an observation that I made in Johannesburg in 2018, I would like to illuminate how class inequalities could impact the relationship between skaters and play out in the social microcosm of an afternoon session in a skatepark:

Last weekend, a skate shoe brand held a promotional event at Johannesburg's Edenvale skatepark: A so-called shoe test. For this purpose, selected street skateboarders from Johannesburg and Pretoria were invited to a public skate session, and were given a new pair of shoes for free. Boerwoers was barbecued and handed out for free, and the skaters were simply asked to skate the park wearing the new shoes. As the event was intended to create video material for advertisement purposes, three skateboarders affiliated to the company filmed throughout the session. A while after the event a video was uploaded on the company's channel acting as an advertising film for the new shoe model. This was a clever way for the company to film marketing material relatively cheaply while building the image of an 'authentic' skateboarding company engaging with the core street skateboarding scene in Johannesburg.

Among the Johannesburg street skateboarders I hung out with, word of mouth had quickly spread and we decided to attend the event. We were not the only ones, but a good number of skaters from various parts of Johannesburg and from a wide variety of backgrounds came together. Yet, an immediate status difference was created in the park as only skaters that had been explicitly invited by the company received free shoes, and free food and drinks. At the same time, this also caught the attention of the small group of skaters I had joined to get to the event, all of the 'VIPs' were of a class privileged background and, besides two exceptions, White South Africans. Ayusch would later harshly criticise that it was still possible in 2018 that a skate-company would sponsor an "all-White skate team".

Anyway, the event went ahead and all the skaters present mingled in the session. It was getting quite full in the park with about 30+ skaters riding at the same time. Status differences became very visible among the practitioners. Middle class skateboarders, almost all White, often drove up in new cars that they parked on the side, they wore fresh-looking branded clothing and their branded equipment was in mint condition. Most of the class marginalised skaters had already travelled long distances on their boards or had used minibus taxis when they got to the park. Only a handful of the present Black skateboarders had come with their own car, a battered looking Mazda 323. The clothes and equipment of class marginalised skaters were visibly worn out, contrasting the fresh look of many class privileged skateboarders. Class differences thus became immediately visible in the park, especially as skaters of similar social background seemed to gather and chill in groups on the sides.

I was particularly moved by three Black kids from Troyville who had come with two older skaters who had given them a lift in their car. It was quite cold that day and the three gathered around the small campfire that one of the organisers had lit on the side of the skatepark. I asked them why they didn't ride in the park like the other skaters to

warm up. They showed me their skateboard, which the three of them wanted to share: It was missing a wheel and a bearing. In this condition it was unusable, but the three kids had hoped that they could get spare parts from other skaters present. Unfortunately, I didn't have any spare parts with me and watched as the three of them tried for a while to get a spare wheel and bearing from other skateboarders, but to no avail. Basically, it was two penny items that prevented them from participating while being surrounded by class privileged skateboarders making their rounds with brand new equipment and new shoes given away to them for free. None of the other skaters really cared for the three Black kids who froze through the afternoon.

In the later afternoon, the session had already lasted a couple hours and some of the older skaters were slightly affected by alcohol or cannabis consumption, a heated argument broke out between a group of White suburbians and two Black Sowetan skateboarders. The White skateboarders, part of a notorious crew known for hardcore street skateboarding and excessive drinking, were at some point heavily intoxicated and started to behave in a rather offensive manner, jelling and fooling around. At some point, they splashed each other with drinking water from a bottle. The water then unintentionally hit one of the Soweto skateboarders, who was standing relaxed at the edge of the park smoking a cigarette, and spilled on his skateboard. This was disrespectful in a double sense, as not only the skater's clothes became partly wet and it was quite chilly that day, but the water could also damage the wood and bearings of his skateboard. The skater immediately approached the culprit and angrily confronted him. The offender tried to calm the situation and sought to limit the damage symbolically, took the skateboard and tried, as far as possible, to rub it dry with his sweater. But that was apparently not enough for the victim of the water attack. Visibly upset the two skaters from Soweto took their belongings, got into their car and drove off from the event. The White skaters looked after them somewhat helplessly. This situation seemed to have been the straw that broke the camel's back for the two Black athletes, as this was not the first time that they witnessed this group of White, class privileged skaters misbehaving in public with little respect for the belongings of others. They encountered each other frequently in downtown Johannesburg. Some other skaters on the Johannesburg scene also viewed these 'rich kids' skeptically, who unconsciously flaunted the affluence they lived in by their destructive and wasteful behaviours. In fact, this aspect was emphasised that day when one of the affluent White skaters, who was seriously drunk and stoned, took an airsoft gun out of the boot of his car and started shooting at other skaters until he was finally stopped and confronted. While some could not afford necessities, others had so many resources at their disposal that they could afford to destroy them. The radical inequalities of the South African class society became very visible on that day.



Illustration 15: At an event at the Edenvale Skatepark in 2018, drastic racialised class inequalities between those present became very visible. While on one side teenagers and young adults of a middle class background, almost all of them White, were enjoying themselves on fresh equipment, on the other side a group of Black children, who had travelled to the event from the poor neighbourhood of Troyville, were not skating that afternoon, but asking other skaters for spare parts to fix their broken skateboard. The children were not able to get all the necessary spare parts for their boards and thus could not join the session. Instead, they warmed themselves by the fire on this chilly day. Among skaters equipment was usually not shared, even if occasionally some wealthier skaters gave away old but still usable equipment or sold it on at low prices. In the context of an economically very unequal society, the individualistic nature of skateboarding, in which each participant required their own equipment set, proved to be a clear downside in this regard.

The experiences in the context of practised skateboarding were thus influenced in many ways by the class position of the athletes, as available economic resources determined the opportunities and freedoms that stood open to the individual athletes. Class inequalities could heavily impact the relationships skaters built with each other. When skateboarding together, the deep inequalities became directly perceptible to the individual participants. On the one hand, this opened up the possibility of gaining insights into the life situation of others. On the other hand, tensions could arise from the coming together of athletes of radically different class backgrounds, not unlike

dynamics in the wider South African society, where the class privileged minority tended to segregate itself from the poor majority, partly to flee the social tensions developing in economically extremely unequal social settings (cf. Bray 2010: 323f.; Bourdieu 2010: 591; Lemanski 2004: 107). Due to the racialised structure of the South African class society, class inequalities that emerged in the scene were often also racialised. I encountered this aspect continuously during my fieldwork and it was particularly marginalised skaters who raised it with me, while privileged athletes tended to downplay it. The racialised class structure of society as a whole was visibly reflected in skateboarding and put the narrative of the integrative power of sport to the test. From the point of view of many skaters, class differences resulted in sometimes strong tensions and also divisions within the scene, that could be handled and pacified to a degree, as Simba, for example, emphasised in an interview:

Interviewer: Regarding divisions, what would you say are divisions that you see in the skating scene in Joburg?

Simba: Ok. Divisions like, it's actually, it's not about race anymore, like I see jealousy.

Interviewer: Hmm, what do you mean with jealousy?

Simba: 'Cause you can see guys from like Alex [Alexandra] when they look at the Edenvale guys they are like 'Oh they have everything, they have money, they have boards, they think they are the shit', when it is not even like that. If they grow up together and talk to each other, it's done. That's all they have to do, make peace. But they decided to say 'Oh, cheesy boy, let me stay on my level'. Even Wands [street skateboarding veteran] told me like, you should know how to switch lanes, but know your lane. We can be friends, but obviously there will always be that division between us.

I encountered Simba's argumentation frequently: not so much racialised divisions, as in the past of the country, but class divisions were named as the central starting point of conflicts and divisions among skaters. But these often overlapped with racialised positions and identities, just like in the wider South African society. Simba himself was a skater that had to work hard to be able to skate as he built up a small business over time by trading skate equipment and clothing on his skate trips. He made only small profits from his business by the standards of class privileged athletes, just enough to survive and be economically independent from his parents, who were working as street traders in Hillbrow. But by Simba's standards, in the harsh environment of the Johannesburg economy, it was an 'ok' income and, most importantly, it allowed him to casually earn money while skateboarding

on the streets¹⁶³: Unlike some of his class privileged friends from the skate scene, who were either studying, living off their families wealth or working well-paid white-collar jobs, he could not pursue skateboarding solely as a non-commercial pastime. Accordingly, Simba's skating days were in some respects quite different from those of the wealthy young men who were so economically secure that skateboarding could be a purely unproductive or even destructive affair for them. Class marginalised skaters always had to walk an extra mile to pursue the time- and money-intensive hobby. It was tensions arising from such profound injustices that skaters had to be able to deal with in diverse spaces, which, in the context of the country's history, was sometimes only possible within limits. While privileged athletes were more likely to be bothered by calls to share in their wealth, or potentially faced with feelings of guilt rather than simply being able to enjoy their wealth, it was not an easy challenge for marginalised skaters to witness the abundance of others in the face of their own economic hardship who, moreover, may not see any reason to share. The enormous class inequalities of society as a whole were thus reproduced within the sphere of skateboarding and had to be handled by skaters. Due to the economic capital required, the sport was a highly unequal playing field in which class inequalities directly impacted the practice and could become highly visible in class diverse spaces.

5.2 Skateboarding in residentially segregated urban spaces: Cape Town and Johannesburg

In a society that was still shaped by the racialised residential segregation implemented by the apartheid regime, residential location and access to mobility were further highly influential aspects impacting the social realities and relations in the skateboarding scene. Despite the successes of the civil society and the transformation to democracy culminating in the election of Nelson Mandela in 1994, South Africa continued to be haunted by drastic inequalities more than two decades later (Maluleke 2019: 2). Tackling the injustices and socio-spatial divisions that had grown under colonialism and apartheid was a gigantic undertaking. The transformation to democracy brought about the political liberation of oppressed groups but did not include a redistribution of property, economic capital and land. Central demands of the ANC and other political opposition groups were abandoned in this regard during the negotiations, which had profound consequences for the further

¹⁶³ I got to know a number of class marginalised skateboarders in Johannesburg who sold skate gear on the side on their 'skate missions' in the city. This business model was possible in Johannesburg because of the small number of skate shops and the rather long distances in the city. Thanks to the proliferation of smartphones and social media, the skateboarding dealers were able to take orders on the fly and deliver them on their skateboards. Some of these trading skaters were practically flying workshops, carrying spare parts, such as wheels, bearings and screws, and tools, and offering immediate support to other skateboarders in parks or at spots.

development of the country (Bond 2004: 47; Allen 2006: 183). Apart from the extreme unequal distribution of wealth, the most visible feature of the country's perpetuated inequalities was residential segregation along race and class lines, as the transformation to democracy had also not brought a fundamental reconfiguration of residential and institutional segregation produced under apartheid. For many South Africans, little had changed in this respect even more than two decades after the transformation. Only in certain spatial contexts reconfigurations could be witnessed (Schensul 2009: 15f.; Schensul/Heller 2010; cf. Visser/Kotze 2008). While in Cape Town, for example, spatial patterns of residential segregation along race and class inherited from apartheid remained largely in place after 1994, in Johannesburg a more complex reconfiguration could be observed which, although it had not led to a more fundamental disruption of segregation, at least transformed it into a slightly different socio-spatial structure (Fleming 2011: 2). Regardless of the concrete context, residential and institutional segregation remained influential in post-apartheid South Africa affecting the lives of residents in manifold aspects. People not only lived in segregated residential neighbourhoods, but also under radically unequal conditions, for example regarding the character and quality of the residential environment, opportunities to form social connections and networks, (conceivable) work and educational opportunities, access to health care and recreational infrastructure, and exposition to and safety from violent crime. The Group Areas defined during apartheid, which formally ceased to exist with the Abolition of Racially Based Land Measures Act in 1991, were often still clearly recognisable almost three decades later (cf. Gukelberger 2018: 80). The highly unequal living conditions in the segregated cities fundamentally determined the opportunities and circumstances under which skateboarding could be accessed and practised. It also affected the mobility and the potential for interaction of skateboarders in the different districts of the city. In the two cities researched, Johannesburg and Cape Town, the concrete manifestation and historical development of residential segregation was different, which influenced the respective skateboarding scenes in different ways. For a closer look at the impact of residential segregation in Cape Town and Johannesburg on the world of skateboarding, I first turn to a more general consideration of the segregated lifeworlds in Cape Town and Johannesburg. Both cities shared certain characteristics, but also differed in their demographic composition and configuration of residential segregation along race and class lines.

Cape Town was without doubt one of the most beautiful cities I have ever visited, spectacularly located on the Atlantic coast and at the foot of Table Mountain. The city was not a tourist magnet by chance. Yet, the stunning beauty of the city and the spectacular landscape that surround it stood in stark contrast to the grinding economic inequality that permeated everyday life. While on one side

of the city extravagant lifestyles were enjoyed and some of the most expensive real estate in the country was traded, on the other side of the city people lived from hand to mouth in tiny flats or houses, or in shacks built from scrap in the iconic South African townships. The roots of the grinding inequalities were to be found in the history of Cape Town, also known as the ‘mother city’ as the starting point of the European colonisation of the country. In 1652, a trading post and stop-over-point for trading ships was established by Jan Van Riebeeck acting under a mandate of the Vereenigde Oost-Indisch Compagnie (VOC), the genesis of modern day Cape Town and South Africa (Fourie 2012: 16; Minter 1986: 4; Trapido 2011: 68). Through its peculiar history, Cape Town had developed a distinct demographic composition in which Coloureds formed the majority, Whites used to be the second largest group followed by Black South Africans. Since the transformation, the share of White and Coloured inhabitants had declined markedly¹⁶⁴ (Lemon/Battersby-Lennard 2009: 519).

Central for producing the peculiar racialised residential segregation and polarised socio-economic structure of the city since the latter 20th century were the forced resettlements that followed the Group Areas Act (1950). Despite forms of racialised segregation having played an important role in the formation of Cape Town and surrounding areas already in the 19th century, before the implementation of the Group Areas Act the city was counted among the least segregated cities of the country (Western 1981: 3). It was under the apartheid government that group areas were imposed on a large scale, producing a rather strict residential segregation of the population according to the racialised categories employed by the apartheid state. While many of the prime locations in the inner city, on the side of the mountain and at the coast were defined as White group areas, people of colour forcibly resettled to group areas on the fringes of the city, largely to the Cape Flats to the east of Cape Town’s inner-city (Visser/Kotze 2008: 2574). Despite the fact that a few informal settlements could already be found in the Cape Flats in the 1930s (Western 1981: 55), larger neighbourhoods were only created in the latter 20th century, like Mitchell’s Plain, which was established in 1973, and Khayelitsha, reserved to Black inhabitants under the Group Areas act and established in 1984 (Gukelberger 2018: 15). South Africans of colour were pushed to the outskirts of the city, into an area that had previously been sparsely populated for good reasons. After the end of apartheid, no significant restitution had taken place and many of those once forcibly resettled, and their descendants, were still living in the respective neighbourhoods. The large, empty site that

¹⁶⁴ According to the 2011 census of the Western Cape municipality the share of the population groups in the Western Cape was as follows: Black African 33,4%, Coloured 49,6%, Indian/Asian 1,1% and White 16,0% (Lahola 2012: 11).

was once District 6 was a reminder that the wounds caused by the forced removals of the apartheid regime had not yet been closed.

Occasionally, South Africans I met would refer to Cape Town as an ‘European city’, implicitly distinguishing it from ‘African cities’ in South Africa, like Johannesburg. This description seemed to be based on several characteristics of Cape Town (cf. Lemon/Battersby-Lennard 2009: 520). It was referring to Cape Town’s historical relevance as the starting point for the European colonisation of the country. Even though economic centres had shifted further north after the discovery of diamonds and gold, the city had retained great importance and an iconic status. I would moreover occasionally hear that Cape Town was a city where ‘old money’ could be found, referring to the riches acquired under colonialism and apartheid. In this respect, Cape Town was sometimes distinguished from Johannesburg in particular, where ‘new money’ was made. According to this image, Johannesburg was the city where economic success could still be earned, where the market was fluid and provided gaps for newcomers to find economic opportunities, whereas Cape Town was ruled by the capital of past generations with few lucrative opportunities for the once excluded and oppressed. The occasional description of Cape Town as a ‘European city’ seemed to further comment on the peculiar demographic composition with a historically relatively small share of Black city dwellers, a majority of Coloured South Africans and a relatively large share of White South Africans and internationals (Gukelberger 2018: 14). The high presence of tourists from Western Europe, especially in the summer months, further underlined this image.

Particularly relevant for this analysis, the ascribed European character also referred to the historic architecture that defined the older parts of the city and its suburbs, and the largely unchanged racialised residential segregation of Cape Town. In contrast to other major cities in the country, such as Johannesburg and Durban (Schensul/Heller 2010: 15), the city centre had not fallen victim to white flight and capital flight, but its socio-spatial composition had survived the transformation to democracy and had even been reinforced through gentrification since the end of apartheid. Already in the 1980s, Cape Town had introduced programmes to prevent the economic decline of the inner city and to promote the gentrification of areas in the vicinity of the CBD, among them Woodstock, Observatory, De Waterkant and Bo-Kaap (Visser/Kotze 2008: 2570). After transformation, Cape Town’s government adopted a radical neoliberal approach of city development (Miraftab 2004: 877f.; cf. Kemp/Lebuhn/Rattner 2015: 705). In this sense, the city government viewed development “primarily in terms of gross domestic product, foreign investment, tourism, dynamic financial services and property industries, and other income-generating activity by the private sector [...]” (Samara 2011: 5). Economically stabilising the city centre was orchestrated through so-called “city

improvement districts” (CIDs) and aimed to attract capital investments to the city core (Booyens 2012: 50f.; Fleming 2011: 2; Visser/Kotze 2008: 2577). Land prices tripled between 2000 and 2007 in and around the inner city (Booyens 2012: 51; Visser/Kotze 2008: 2583), leading to rising rents and real estate prices, and thus caused the displacement of poor residents to the city’s fringes, most of them being Coloured and Black South Africans, since at the same time the city did not provide sufficient affordable social housing close to the CBD. Moreover, the presence of the largely Black and Coloured poor was strictly regulated in the CBD’s public spaces. Beggars, homeless people and street children were deterred from staying in the city centre on the basis of harsh legislation and the at times violent actions of the security forces (cf. Samara 2011: 2).¹⁶⁵ Racialised class segregation was thus practically not abolished after the transformation to democracy, but reproduced through other means (Samara 2011: 4). Precisely because race and class overlapped widely in the population, political and economic elites could pursue quasi-racist policies under the umbrella of economy-centred city development (Booyens 2012: 51; Miraftab 2004: 886; Samara 2011: 4; Visser/Kotze 2008: 2580). Gentrification in Cape Town meant, in other words, largely the displacement of residents and entrepreneurs of colour by White residents and entrepreneurs who dominated the middle and upper classes. The government in post-apartheid Cape Town seemed to choose not to counter, but nurture persistent racialised class segregation with its neoliberal, economy-centred approach. Yet, not only the inner-city, but also the picturesque residential areas close to the sea and the mountain were visibly in the hands of wealthy South Africans and foreigners, most of them White. Steinberg had captured the distinct character of Cape Town’s privileged areas in the 2000s:

“The city’s bourgeoisie lives along its slopes: below its face, the old, tastefully restored neighbourhoods of the inner city; along its eastern flank, the oak-lined streets and white-washed double-storeys of Newlands, Claremont and Rosebank; on its western flank, a string of luxurious Atlantic Ocean settlements, built into the slopes, facing the sea.” (Steinberg 2004: 4)

Steinberg’s description was still true in the late 2010s. While the more desirable parts of the city were attractive playing grounds and investment opportunities for wealthy South Africans and foreigners, recurrent evictions of class marginalised city dwellers, often Coloured South Africans from gentrifying areas relatively close to the CBD and class privileged neighbourhoods, could be

165 Head, Tom (07.02.2019): Cape Town “anti-poor” fury: Why homeless people are being fined R1500, The South African, online-source: <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/cape-town-homeless-fines-what-for-how-much/> [accessed: 24.07.2019].

witness and read about in the news when I conducted fieldwork between 2016 and 2020. The Bo-Kaap, Woodstock and Observatory districts, all historic working class neighbourhoods with a higher proportion of South Africans and foreigners of colour, were hotspots in this context. Even two of my skateboarding informants had to move due to rising rent prices. Yusuf had to move out with his family from a nice house in Observatory as the landlord chose to almost double the rent. He and his family at least found a smaller house elsewhere in the neighbourhood. A teenager I met through the programme of a skate NGO had to move with his family from Bo-Kaap to Athlone. Also in this case the family could not afford the rising rent prices anymore. In Bromwell Street in Woodstock, around the corner from my place of residence in Observatory, several Coloured families were evicted at once because an investor had bought several houses in the street and aimed to rent the objects to affluent South Africans and internationals (cf. Visser/Kotze 2008: 2585). Protests against the project were unsuccessful. It seemed that a continuous displacement of poor residents from attractive residential areas to poor districts was taking place. In cases like Woodstock, even some spaces known as ‘grey areas’ under apartheid were now subjected to increased segregation processes.¹⁶⁶

The city centre had remained the economic hub of Cape Town, defined by large corporations, government institutions and the tourism industry (Sinclair-Smith/Turok 2012: 396ff., 406). Finance, business and professional services constituted the fastest growing sectors in the early 2010s (Sinclari-Smith/Turok 2012: 402). Yet, economic growth was limited almost exclusively to the class privileged parts of the city and largely kept away from the marginalised areas, a dynamic that had been increasing since the end of apartheid. The class marginalised areas in the Cape Flats were still characterised by a drastic lack of job opportunities and a high unemployment rate (ibid. 404ff.). The spatialised, socio-economic structure laid out in apartheid had remained in place, with the industry and majority of jobs being situated in the class privileged areas, and the predominantly Coloured and Black workers commuting to their jobs there by minibus taxi and train from the city’s fringes (ibid. 392). The class privileged, White dominated historical core of Cape Town was still produced at the cost of systematically banishing the class marginalised majority of colour from it. As Terreblanche put it, in democratic South Africa, the means and legitimation for the exploitation of the majority had changed, but the effects exhibited a concerning similarity:

“The common denominator between the old and the new systems is that part of society was/is systematically and undeservedly enriched, while the majority of the population were/are systemically and undeservedly impoverished – in the old system through

166 McCool, Alice (25.05.2017): ‘End spatial apartheid’: why housing activists are occupying Cape Town, The Guardian, online-source: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/may/25/spatial-apartheid-housing-activists-occupy-cape-town-gentrification> [accessed: 25.02.2018].

system exploitation, and in the new system through system exclusion and systemic neglect.” (Terreblanche 2002: 423)

The Cape Flats, located to the east and south-east of the CBD had long fulfilled the function to act as a reservoir for workers and the unemployed, most of whom being Coloured and Black. These neighbourhoods were explicitly not built by the regime to offer residents a good quality of life and local economy with jobs on their doorstep. In fact, the apartheid regime had deliberately housed the racially oppressed in the harsh desert environment with strong winds, high flooding risks, large volumes of dust from mobile sands and poorly fertile soil (Anderson/O’Farrel 2012: 7; Steinberg 2004: 111f.). Living conditions differed within the different Cape Flats neighbourhoods, from cramped makeshift houses in the townships of Delft and Khayelitsha to spacious houses in Coloured middle class neighbourhoods of Mitchell’s Plain and Strandfontein. Within these neighbourhoods further differentiations existed regarding class, national and race background of its residents. What all neighbourhoods had in common was that they offered precarious living conditions compared to the once White group areas. They were disadvantaged in practically every respect compared to the former white group areas. The Cape Flats was the “outcast ghetto of the underclass”¹⁶⁷ (Lemon/Battersby-Lennard 2009: 520) or, in the words of Cape Flat’s rapper Isaac Newton and his band DOOKOOM, the place where people were treated by the government as if they “don’t exist”¹⁶⁸. Life on the Cape Flats had always been tough. The apartheid state had no interest in providing much more than the bare minimum for their residents. Especially in the mid-1980s, the Cape Flats found themselves in a recurring state of emergency of rampant violence, through state repression, (partly state-sponsored) gang crime, and civil society activism aimed at making South Africa ungovernable (Steinberg 2004: 193f.). Without question, the defeat of the apartheid regime had brought relief for the inhabitants. Yet, even after 1994, the arduous living conditions had hardly changed for the better, in some areas even for the worse (Lemanski 2004: 103f.; Miraftab 2004: 886). While a share of the Cape Flat’s residents was able to find employment in blue and white collar jobs, many were struggling to survive, concentrated and cramped in the slum areas, living a hand-to-mouth-existence. Just to put it in perspective: Of Cape Town's approximately 4.4 million residents, 45.9% were living below the poverty line of R1227¹⁶⁹ per

167 One skateboarder from Mitchell’s Plain called the Cape Flats a “concentration camp” in a conversation.

168 I.O.T Records (10.09.2017): Dookoom – You don’t exist [video], Youtube, online-source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yN9BLYHNg7Q> [accessed: 22.6.2021].

169 This corresponded to approximately €75 in 2019.

person per month in 2019, according to data provided by the city government (City of Cape Town 2020: 20).

Vegetation was sparse on the barely fertile soil and in the windy plain. Much of the infrastructure was visibly run down. While some public spaces were redeveloped with quality facilities, overall public space seemed to be as poor in resources as many of the residents. Although the Cape Flats were home to a large part of Cape Town's population, they seemed to not receive the investments necessary to provide its inhabitants good living conditions. I heard this opinion often, and especially often from residents of the Cape Flats. In almost all important public services and facilities, such as education, health care, police and waste collection, the Cape Flats were still much worse off compared to the privileged neighbourhoods and once White group areas (Lemon/Battersby-Lennard 2009: 527, 531). The neoliberalisation of the state after 1994 had been instrumental in the underprovision of resources to inhabitants in the marginalised neighbourhoods (Miraftab 2004: 877f.).

Extreme economic hardships due to few, low-paid jobs and a weak welfare state had nurtured an escalation of the crime and gang problem. Fear of violent crime and deadly violence were, even more than in other parts of the city, an everyday challenge for residents. The Cape Flats were the manifestation of perpetuated injustices and older residents rightly looked to the mountain in the distance and lamented that decades later they still had not been able to return to their houses, but were still trying to survive in the most precarious conditions in a barren landscape and often crime-ridden neighbourhoods more than 25 years after the transformation to democracy. Cape Town was, in a way, a city divided between an affluent, beautiful world inhabited by mainly White residents (and a large number of tourists in summer), and an impoverished, barren world inhabited by mainly Coloured and Black South Africans. Both worlds were connected, as many Cape Flats residents travelled towards the old CBD for work, but residentially segregated from each other. Cape Town seemed to clearly exhibit materially and socio-spatially the perpetuated injustices sowed by European colonialism and apartheid.

Life in Cape Town was very different from that in Johannesburg, and this was not only due to the completely different geographical and environmental conditions. Johannesburg exhibited numerous similarities, but also numerous differences. Unlike Cape Town, Johannesburg was not necessarily a beauty, but rather a somewhat grim urban giant. The city was a much younger city than Cape Town and its history was closely linked to mining on the once resource-rich Witwatersrand. Johannesburg fundamentally exhibited the same tendencies of radical segregation along divisions of race and class as Cape Town. In many parts of the city, the old group areas had been perpetuated after 1994. To the

north, south and east of the old CBD vast, often wealthy suburbs were located, in most cases these suburbs largely inhabited by White South Africans. The poor of the city, the majority being Black, were largely residing in and around the old city centre, and in townships, like Soweto (south-west from the CBD), Alexandra (north of the CBD), Tembisa (north-east of the CBD) and Katlehong (south-east of the CBD). Not fundamentally different than in Cape Town, the architecture and socio-spatial order inherited from apartheid enclosed the poverty of the working majority of colour in spatial pockets allowing “white Johannesburgers to avoid knowledge of the human costs” (Falkhof 2020: 125) of White privilege and wealth. However, Johannesburg’s historical city core had experienced a significant socio-spatial reconfiguration, which kicked in since the 1980s and intensified further in the course of the transformation. The old CBD, a White group area and economic hub of the city during apartheid, experienced a white flight and the flight of significant parts of the economy to the north (Schensul/Heller 2010: 15). Also some of the neighbourhoods adjacent to the CBD, like Troyville, Fordsburg, Mayfair and Yeoville, underwent demographic changes through the exodus of White residents and the immigration of poor Black South Africans and immigrants. Sandton, further up in the north, had become the new economic centre of the city providing space for accounting, legal and information services, the new economic powerhouses in Johannesburg (Mbembe 2008b: 54; Steinberg/Van Uyl/Bond: 1992: 266f.). The old CBD was transformed from an economically privileged into an economically marginalised space where poverty was rampant and coexisted with bubbles of prosperity (De Vries 2008: 298). The old CBD was still an economically vibrant place, but small and informal shops dominated the streetscape, and some larger companies, especially from the financial sector, still operated impressive high-rise buildings in the city.

In contrast to Cape Town which was characterised by a divided structure tending to neatly separate wealthy, largely White from poor, largely Coloured and Black residents, Johannesburg was resembling much more of a patchwork of wealthy and poor areas (cf. Mbembe 2008b: 48; Murray 2011: 4). Poor and wealthy areas could be found in immediate vicinity to each other, grinding poverty and excessive luxury at times separated only by a street and sophisticated security architecture. Alexandra and Sandton, and Diepsloot and Steyn City were striking cases in this regard (Murray 2008: 47f.). The spatial proximity did not mean that there was much overlap between poor and affluent lifeworlds, their segregation was rather drastic and the explosion of the number of gated communities spoke volumes (Breetzke et. al. 2014: 4; Raidoo 2020: 138). The segregation of the affluent from the poor was also a highly visible trend in Johannesburg. However, the socio-spatial ‘mosaic’ was able to evoke the feeling that Johannesburg was somewhat more

‘integrated’ than, for example, Cape Town. This even affected the spatial distribution of crime. Despite the fact that Cape Town had statistically replaced Johannesburg as the ‘murder capital’ of the country in 2018¹⁷⁰, (violent) crime continued to be an enormous problem in Johannesburg, deeply affecting the daily lives of all inhabitants. Due to the more eclectic socio-spatial structure of the city, the occurrence of crime also seemed to be more unpredictable. While in Cape Town violent crime was mainly concentrated in the marginalised areas of the Cape Flats and kept away from the privileged neighbourhoods, there was no such sharp separation in Johannesburg. While certain neighbourhoods in Johannesburg were also known for high levels of violent crime, the impression that one could become a victim of crime anywhere and at any time seemed to be quite widespread. During my fieldwork, I occasionally was told that Johannesburg was not a ‘European city’, but an ‘African city’ which seemed to refer to several characteristics of the ‘city of gold’. First and foremost, Johannesburg’s demography was closer to mirroring the country’s demographic composition¹⁷¹, with about three thirds of the city’s residents being Black (cf. Crankshaw/Parnell 2002: 9) and the visible existence of a Black middle class (despite the fact, that the racialised class society was largely intact) (Crankshaw/Parnell 2002: 16). Consequently, in contrast to Cape Town, Black and African cultures were constitutive aspects of urban life, especially in the old inner-city. ‘Jozi’, the “Afropolis” (Hook 2020: 94) was an iconic centre of (urban) African culture and, as Mbembe (2008b: 39) had put it, an important centre of African modernity. The old CBD, once built by the White controlled mining industry to be then reclaimed by Black inhabitants, was a particularly strong symbolic expression of this. The vivid economy offered many opportunities (or hopes) for lucrative incomes and was fragmented into a number of hubs in different areas of the city (Masango 2020: 47; Murray 2008: 3). Even after the mining industry had lost its central place in the city’s economy, Johannesburg was a first destination for many immigrants from rural areas and neighbouring states looking to find jobs and other economic opportunities.

Having only grown considerably in the course of the gold discoveries of the late 19th century (Mbembe 2008b: 40), Johannesburg’s architecture also emanated less of a colonial flair than Cape Town but seemed modern and, at times, almost American. Moreover, it contrasted Cape Town’s historical city, which appeared clean, tidy and neat and surrounded by beautiful scenery, with its rather gritty, chaotic, gloomy and somehow dystopian flair, surrounded by a cratered landscape and

170 Sanews (11.09.2018): Nyanga, Western Cape, is still the murder capital of South Africa, *The South African*, <https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/most-murders-in-south-africa-nyanga/> [accessed: 15.9.2018].

171 According to the 2011 census the City of Johannesburg Local Municipality had a total population of 4,4 million of which 76,4% were Black African, 12,3% were White people, 5,6% were Coloured people, and 4,9% were Indian/Asian (StatsSA (2011): City of Johannesburg, Department of Statistics South Africa, http://www.statssa.gov.za/?page_id=993&id=city-of-johannesburg-municipality [accessed: 10.7.2021]).

dotted with industrial production sites that were no longer operational (Masango 2020: 50). Johannesburg CBD's grittiness perhaps reflected the realities of life for the country's majority much more accurately than Cape Town's beautified city centre and adjacent wealthy neighbourhoods, which tended to emanate an aura of European and western extravagance. The tension between progress and stagnation of the post-apartheid South African society seemed to find drastic expression in Jozi. Still, the associated dream of rapid economic success spawned by the gold rush seemed to have almost been ingrained in the city's culture as much as the hard work ethic (cf. Falkhof/Van Staden 2020: 8; Morgan 2020: 64f.; Murray 2008: 2; Murray 2011: 1; Odhiambo/Muponde 2020: 253). And yet, the economy-centred logic behind Johannesburg's development involved exclusion and sanctioning of the poor: A revanchist urbanism, as Murray (2008: 228f.) had called it, fuelling the radical inequalities in living conditions in the privileged and marginalised neighbourhoods in Johannesburg. At first glance, Johannesburg may have seemed less divided, but it was just fragmented into countless small patches of profound inequality. Tensions of change and stagnation, hope and failure of developments in the post-apartheid society seemed to manifest themselves in Johannesburg in quite complex ways.

5.2.1 The impact of residential segregation and mobility inequality

Johannesburg and Cape Town formed the two focus areas of the present analysis. The two cities differed significantly in their historical development, demographic composition of the population and socio-spatial order. At the same time, they shared the characteristic features of South African cities as spatial manifestations of the deep inequalities that characterised the country even more than 25 years after the end of apartheid. For a sport and a subculture that exhibited a particular focus on urban space, the segregated realities were bound to have implications. In fact, the impact of residential segregation along overlapping race and class lines on the subculture turned out to be a particularly relevant aspect that was structurally working against the potentially inclusive qualities of the sport and subculture, and contributed to the reproduction of segregated (subcultural) lifeworlds and the constitution of latently segregated social networks along race and class divisions. As many skateboarders started to practice the sport in childhood or youth and started to build their first and often long-lasting friendships at this age, this point was all the more influential as children and adolescents were particularly dependent on building social ties close to their place of residence. As described by Bray et. al., residential segregation particularly impacted the lives of children and adolescents:

“The particular suburb or township in which children or adolescents live shapes profoundly almost every aspect of their everyday lives and their future opportunities. Its effects reproduce many of the effects of the racial hierarchy imposed by apartheid, including a restricted range of family dynamics, income levels, social networks and notions of race.” (Bray et. al. 2010: 323)

Because children and adolescents were quite restricted in terms of mobility options, they could primarily build friendships in their free time in their residential areas, which led to the reproduction of race and class divisions in the segregated South African society (cf. Jensen 2008: 63). Also among skateboarding children and teenagers I could witness this. Friendships often developed with other skaters who resided close to where they lived. In the class and race segregated racialised class society, this meant that (closer) friendships developed mainly among skaters of similar race and class backgrounds. This was especially the case among class-marginalised skaters, while some class-privileged skaters were able to be more mobile due to support from parents, relatives or friends. Only when getting older and therefore more mobile were skaters able to escape these dynamics and to actively engage in socially more diverse environments. For adult skateboarders it was much more feasible to cultivate diverse friendship circles beyond the boundaries of one’s residential neighbourhood. However, the friendships made in childhood and adolescence were often of particular depth and sustainability, and maintained relevance up until adulthood. The socio-spatial segregation therefore had an impact among skateboarders of all age groups.

Among adult skateboarders, the tendency for the reproduction of race and class segregation was becoming particularly visible with the social composition and public self-presentation of skateboarding crews. Crews could be called the skateboarding-equivalent of teams in mainstream sports. Although the focus of attention in skateboarding was on individual athletes, not collectives, skate crews did play a visible role in the South African skate scene (cf. Schäfer 2020: 219). Crews, which were more or less loosely organised groups of skateboarding friends, visibly appeared at skate spots, skateparks and in competitions. They could play an important role in the subcultural lives of skateboarders who would go on trips together and share resources on their ‘missions’, such as transport, skate gear and food. Some crews produced videos, with individual members each contributing parts that were then edited together into a longer film representing the crews as collectives. Crews also represented themselves to the public in local skateboarding magazines and, at times, mainstream media features on the sport. Yet, crews were often quite loosely organised and short-lived. Typical of youth scenes, the informal institutionalisation of crews in skateboarding was more or less fleeting.

As previously mentioned, the social composition as well as the self-representation of crews pointed to both the perpetuation of race and class categories, as well as the impact of residential segregation in skateboarding. The ‘landscape’ of skateboarding crews in South Africa during my fieldwork reflected the racialised class segregation in the wider society as crews often referred to their constitution in specific neighbourhoods, which were characterised by particular demographic characteristics in the segregated society. This was exemplarily brought to the fore at a Red Bull event ‘Dala the city’¹⁷² in Johannesburg in 2018. For the event skate crews from Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban were invited to compete at a number of well-known skate spots. Some of the crews attending the event I had encountered in during my research beforehand. An associate of the Cape Town based skate shop Baseline had made a video introducing the partaking crews and had uploaded it on youtube. As became clear from the introduction, the crews were portrayed as representatives of specific neighbourhoods and racialised groups at the same time.¹⁷³ The Soweto Skate Society, SSS, represented Black skateboarders from Soweto, and the 3 Square Crew represented Black skateboarders from Alexandra. From Pretoria, the Slappy Skate Crew consisted of White Afrikaaner skateboarders, with one skater of colour among them. Wasted and Veg Squad consisted of middle class skateboarders from the Northern and Southern Suburbs of Johannesburg, most of them being White. The 20sk8 crew, the only group from Cape Town taking part in the event, undoubtedly represented Coloured skateboarders from the Cape Flats, as they made clear in their self-description on their facebook profile¹⁷⁴. At the Red Bull event, therefore, both the diversity of South African skateboarding in the late 2010s and the continued relevance of race and class, as well as residential segregation along these social categories, became apparent.

A closer look at the Capetonian skatecrew 20sk8 seemed particularly informative regarding this topic as they were very active and visible in the media in the years leading up to and at the time of the research, going beyond usual skateboarding formats commenting on social and political issues affecting skateboarders in Cape Town, with Wesley Smith and Shuaib Philander being the charismatic representatives of the crew. In the short films ‘Jas Boude’¹⁷⁵ and ‘From Cape Town to the Cape Flats with 20sk8’¹⁷⁶ viewers are given deeper insights into the realities of skateboarding in

172 Cape Times (06.08.2018): Skate crew ramps up their game, pressreader, online-source:

<https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/cape-times/20180806/281711205466924> [accessed: 24.11.2020].

173 Baseline Skate Shop (): Baseline – REALIFE S01E06 – “Dala The Crews” [video], Youtube, online-source:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7PkcEus4LM> [accessed: 20.7.2021].

174 Twenty Skeight (2018): Rep Your Wood: A Game of Skeight Contest Circuit [event announcement], facebook, online-source: <https://facebook.com/events/124443615095643/permalink/179350836271587> [accessed: 12.11.2018].

175 Jas Boude the Film (01.03.2016): Jas Boude [video], Youtube, online-source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vTCMfNqeTI> [accessed: 23.11.2019].

176 20sk8 (08.06.2015): From Cape Town to the Cape Flats with 20sk8 [video], Youtube, online-source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYVHaKeLcaU> [accessed: 23.11.2019].

the Cape Flats. In fact, 20sk8 was probably the most well-known skate crew in the country (and according to some skaters on the African continent). Notably, 20sk8 attracted public attention by incorporating the stigmatised reputation of the Cape Flats into their self-confident public self-presentation. The name of 20sk8 made a direct reference to the infamous numbers gangs in Cape Town, that were most active in the former Coloured group areas of the Cape Flats, and therefore added to the self-identification as a Coloured skateboarding crew¹⁷⁷ (cf. Jensen 2008: 168). Samuel, who was among the early members of 20sk8, explained to me how the group was referring to numbers gang culture in a tongue-in-cheek manner, transforming it into a constructive approach towards skateboarding and providing a positive platform for children and youth from the Cape Flats to identify with¹⁷⁸:

Samuel: Back in the day I said this to Michael, we do what Ngeleketshane and Nongoloza¹⁷⁹ couldn't do, as like, two guys who basically started this gang thing, you know the history of the gangsters in the mines. They were like pulling the guys going to work saying, 'na, you don't go to work there, we go out and rob the people'. [...] So like, I say like, we doing what they couldn't do. We took it and we skate with it, we are making it like skating. Ya, it is hectic. And making people actually be fond of the name, of the bad stigma attached to something like a prison gang, the 28s. You know, going the opposite with it, because that's what people think about it. So, just because you are on the [Cape] Flats you are sort of doomed to be there, and that's it for you. It is what with the kids also sort of want, you know. They want that gangster type feeling, like, in the hood. But still, in like a cool gangster sense, you know. Not really like be a gangster per se, a brotherhood sort of gang. [...] We are not really like gangsters.

177 On their facebook page, the crew made the connection to the Cape Flats and numbers gang culture very clear: "With roots going back to the early 2000, when a group of skateboarders from the Cape Flats started entrenching a new attitude, style and their own set of rules for survival not only in skateboarding but in their immediate communities [...] This style is derived from our immediate locations - The Cape Flats , where there is no Hills , No Ramps and No skateparks ... Just a mentality, a mentality that understood the importance of a brotherhood and putting a collective consciousness above all else ... 20sk8 is an ideology adopted from the gangs on the Cape Flats (26, 27 , 28 ... 28 being top ranked) and with this 20sk8 has become the most active and spoken about movement on the cape flats since the days of upheaval." (Twenty Skeight (2017): About, facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/pg/twentyskeight/about/> [accessed: 12.5.2017]).

178 The crew did not glorify or trivialise gang culture, but rather commented on the phenomenon in a manner that mirrored the ambivalent role of the gangs in the Cape Flats. The brutal effects of gangs were addressed by 20sk8 in various ways. One of the branded griptapes the crew sold proclaimed: "Numbers lie on the Cape Flats, they also die". The short film "From Cape Town to the Cape Flats with 20sk8" starts with a scene in which one of the members recounts in front of the camera how a friend had been executed near his home, potentially by gang members (20sk8 (08.06.2015): From Cape Town to the Cape Flats with 20sk8 [video], Youtube, online-source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYVHaKeLCaU> [accessed: 23.11.2019].).

179 Ngeleketshane and Nongoloza were the mythological founding members of the numbers gangs in South Africa. There existed various versions of the story of the gangs' origin circulating around the two founding members (Steinberg 2004: 37-45).

In this sense, members of the crew identified themselves as skaters from the Cape Flats who confidently played with stereotypes circulating around (young) Coloured men (Crapanzano 1985: 261f.), but also made reference to the realities of life that were simply constitutive in many Cape Flats neighbourhoods, as founding member Michael emphasised:

Michael: So like, like what we do, this is what is not cool to other is like, we don't just represent skateboarding, you know like, we represent our skateboarding, we represent skateboarding on the Cape Flats, when we say this in the documentary [about the crew] like, if a kid on the Cape Flats hear the word 20sk8, you don't have to, you don't have to see our documentary, or see our videos, or know me and Keagan, or know Lyle [two other founding members], to know what 20sk8 stands for, 'cause immediately you understand.



Illustration 16: A young skater waits for his turn at a newly built skatepark in Woodstock, Cape Town. The boy was filled with pride when he received some motivational words from a well-known skater of the 20sk8 crew who was skating in the park. The printed griptape of his skateboard was a signature item of this crew and contained a critical commentary on the gang realities in the Cape Flats: “Numbers do lie on the Flats, they also die”. 20sk8 were, at the time of the field research, publicly very visible and recognised voices of skateboarding in Cape Town.

Moreover, 20sk8 was an unusual skate crew in the sense that some members of the crew were raising political and social issues, and questions around race, class and ethnicity that affected skateboarding in Cape Town. 20sk8 was the voice of class-marginalised skaters of colour in the city, addressing injustices and inequalities in Cape Town and the local skate scene. This did not go down well with all skateboarders in Cape Town, particularly a larger number of White skaters I met were bothered by the 'politicisation' of skateboarding. In a way, 20sk8 were a particularly striking example of the continuing relevance of social inequality and distinctions, and residential segregation of lifeworlds in the racialised class society, and its impact on the lives of youth and young adults in South Africa (cf. Mbembe 2008b: 17; Schensul/Heller 2010: 4). Skateboarding did not necessarily contribute to the levelling of social inequalities and distinctions, even if it offered a template for a diverse (imagined) sportive and subcultural community. Social inequalities and distinctions were manifested, visible and (increasingly) discussed within the realm of the sport and subculture. The (self-)representation of the crews exemplified that these, like closer friendship circles in general, tended to develop between skaters living close to each other. In a racialised class society, this implied that skaters of similar class positions and race positions, who had to deal with similar circumstances and challenges in life, tended to develop closer social connections. Race and class related residential segregation thus seemed to contribute to the reproduction of social divisions in skateboarding, and wider societal structures tended to be mirrored in the sport. At the same time, the 'mosaic' of the skateboarding scene, made up of the various skate crews each referring to and playing with social identities, made clear that South African skateboarding had become a quite diverse social space and that this diversity was certainly embraced. Events such as 'Dala the city', which tried to reflect the diversity of street skateboarding across the country, highlighted this. Voices and social positions that had remained largely unheard a decade ago became increasingly visible and valued in public discourse.

As previously outlined, street skateboarding was defined by the creative appropriation of urban public space. For skateboarders, the access to usable urban space was restricted by various factors, among which in the South African context the interplay of residential segregation and mobility were of particular relevance. Due to their specific requirements in terms of architecture and obstacles, ambitious skaters depended on being mobile to get to places of interest in urban space. Yet, South Africans had quite unequal opportunities in terms of access to mobility. As Bourdieu (1991: 30) once summed up, class privilege and mobility were linked in capitalist class societies, where wealth could be directly linked to spatial freedom. In South Africa this was the case in an extreme form due to the unsolved legacy of the apartheid era in this regard. The apartheid state had virtually

immobilised the majority, making it much more difficult for most South Africans to access individual, motorised vehicles, thus making them predominantly rely on mini-taxis, trains and other affordable forms of transport (McCaul 1991; Pirie 1992: 172). The White minority, on the other hand, was privileged in terms of mobility, especially through access to individual, motorised means of transport. In combination with car-centred infrastructure and residential segregation, this allowed for particularly effective enforcement of racist residential segregation (Pirie 1992: 173, 179). Even more than 20 years after the transformation, little had changed. While cars were accessible to a much larger proportion of the population, mobility inequality was still very visible. The clearest expression of this was that White South Africans were extremely rare among users of mini-taxis and trains, the most affordable means of transport (Samara 2011: 84), but often had (new) cars at their disposal. Many class-privileged and White households owned multiple vehicles. In poor areas and townships, quite a share of old and already heavily worn vehicles could be found among the available cars: Many residents could not afford anything better. Where owning a vehicle was already a privilege, it was rarely conceivable to own more than one. In the sprawling and crime-ridden urban spaces, numerous implications followed from this, adding another layer to existing inequalities and distinctions. Mobility inequality had a deep impact on practices and social relations in skateboarding. Overall, the mobility inequalities among skaters pretty much mirrored those of society as a whole. It heavily affected the way skateboarders were able to approach and use spaces, and it was a driving force in the reproduction of social inequalities and divisions inherent in segregated urban spaces.

Skaters of class privileged positions were generally less dependent on their immediate surroundings and able to comfortably access spaces further away due to the availability of economic capital and access to mobility options. This was mainly due to the fact that many class privileged skaters (or their parents) owned cars or motorbikes, which provided them a massive mobility advantage in the car-centred traffic infrastructure of South African cities (cf. Pirie 1992: 172).¹⁸⁰ With a car or motorbike it was usually easy to get to all kinds of skate spots and skateparks in a time-saving way. Class privileged skateboarders with their own transport could comfortably travel from one skatepark or skate spot to another several times in one day: Ride in a skatepark in the morning, explore the city centre at lunchtime, drive to a remote spot outside the city in the afternoon, and make their way back home late in the evening. Certain, remote places, like interesting spots,

180 In fact, automobility had played an important role under apartheid to segregate the society. By making it very difficult for the majority to access motor vehicles in a car-centric infrastructure, they were effectively demobilised and prevented from accessing the spaces of the privileged. On the other hand, privileged Whites were allowed extensive freedoms and separation from the majority (Pirie 1992: 173). As there had been no fundamental reconfiguration of the transport infrastructure, these mechanisms continued to have an effect after 1994.

obstacles and skateparks on the fringes of the city and in the countryside, were often only accessible by individual motorised transport (in a reasonable timespan). Many of the wealthier skaters I met made good use of their mobility options, especially on the weekends, by exploring the urban landscape and countryside in their cars or on motorbikes. Those who did not yet own a vehicle or were too young to have a driving licence were often dropped off and picked up by their parents. Especially very young skaters thus benefited greatly from privileged mobility choices in the family, as independent movement through the city was not yet possible for them. In crime-ridden urban public spaces, motorised transport massively increased safety and therefore comfort. In order to get to certain spots or skate parks, it could be necessary to traverse particularly dangerous areas, which was much easier to do with a vehicle. Being highly mobile, class privileged athletes could experience the full potential of the skateboard, and could freely decide what skills and style they wanted to practice, and choose the appropriate spaces and environments to do so. They were also able to use their economic capital to take longer trips around South Africa and abroad, visiting popular and prestigious skate spots and skateparks in other parts of the world that many skaters from poor backgrounds could only dream of.¹⁸¹ In other words, the world was open to them, and they could gather many experiences and hone their skills on the skateboard in a highly mobile, flexible fashion. Skaters with privileged access to means of mobility could also expand their social networks considerably (nationally and internationally) and expose themselves to extensive diversity of South African society on their own terms.

Due to their often lacking access to individualised transport and restricted mobility, class marginalised skateboarders found themselves much more dependent on the conditions in their immediate surrounding and in their residential neighbourhoods (cf. Bourdieu 1991: 26, 30). Despite the challenges, class marginalised skaters found ways and means to explore the urban landscape. However, this usually required taking more effort, time, uncertainties and risks than class privileged skaters had to. Less economically fortunate skateboarders who had a bit of economic capital at their disposal could resort to public transport, mostly in the form of minibus taxis, trains and buses. This was slower and less flexible compared to having one's own motorised transport at hand: it took more time and did not take one directly to the destination, but only close by. Skateboarders using public transport often still had to cover considerable distances on foot or on a board, and thus had to navigate various challenges in order to get to skate spots and skateparks at all. For example, skaters relying on minibus taxis first had to make their way to a minibus taxi stop or rank on their

181 Among class privileged skaters, the USA and Western Europe, the two global hotspots of the sport, were particularly popular destinations. Numerous of the wealthier skaters I met were doing regular trips to North American and European countries.

skateboard or on foot, pay for the ride, get out on the road or at a taxi rank, and then move to the spot or park on their skateboard or on foot. This process was clearly more time-consuming and risky than using a car or motorbike for the same trip.

In addition, not all places were accessible by public transport. Public transport routes were particularly sparse when it came to getting to certain privileged areas or travelling in-between them. After all, the public transport infrastructure was still largely geared towards getting blue-collar workers to their places of work, but not necessarily towards increasing general mobility in the population (cf. Jensen 2008: 52). Getting from the inner city of Johannesburg to some areas of the Northern Suburbs by minibus taxi, for example, could be difficult and require to move longer distances through public space on foot or on board. In Cape Town, accessing some of the privileged suburbs by using public transport could be equally cumbersome. Also remote skate spots and other places of interest for skateboarders, such as waterless canals on the outskirts of the city (highly attractive spots for street skaters), were often hardly accessible by public transport. Moreover, since most public transport routes were not operated at night and it was more dangerous to use trains and minibus taxis in the dark, getting around using public transport was more or less limited to daytime. Public transport did not take people everywhere and at all times of the day, and therefore restricted its users freedoms of movement considerably. The heritage of the apartheid infrastructure was still structurally demobilising the class marginalised majority of the country (cf. Pirie 1992: 173f.).

However, among (especially young) skaters from low-income families, there were quite a few who could not afford public transport either. While some skaters covered distances using other methods¹⁸², and others accepted limited mobility and made the best of their immediate environment, the skateboard itself then became particularly important as a means of transport for some skaters. Although the possibilities to cover long distances on a skateboard are limited, within cities it allows a considerable expansion of the circle of movement. The usefulness of the skateboard here depends on various factors, not every (urban) space is well suited to be skated. Paths or roads must be at least reasonably firm and smooth. Weather conditions, especially wind and rain, can render skateboarding tedious and slow¹⁸³. In areas with many hills, a skateboard has equally limited usability, as walking uphill is required and going downhill quickly becomes risky due to high speeds. And while the skateboard provides a significant speed advantage over walking, a skateboard

182 In Cape Town, some children and youths of a poor background managed to jump and hang on the train carriages to get from the city's fringes to the CBD. As they were unable to afford tickets for the train, this was one of the only ways to visit skate spots and skateparks in the city centre.

183 Especially in Cape Town, the sometimes strong winds could turn commuting on a skateboard or bicycle into a chore. In the Cape Flats, due to the lack of trees and multi-story buildings, this problem seemed even more pronounced than in the downtown area.

is still quite fragile, unreliable and slow device bringing additional challenges into play, especially when riding through busy urban environments. In any case, having a skateboard was an advantage over walking and numerous skaters I met made use of their boards to commute in the city. Skateboarders from lower class backgrounds residing close to the old CBD of Johannesburg, for example, were able to move through the inner-city in a relatively time-saving way and some of them relied completely on their skateboards to get around (Phasha 2012: 105). In Cape Town, there were some skaters who did most of their commuting on their boards in the inner city area, for example to get to work or to go to spots.

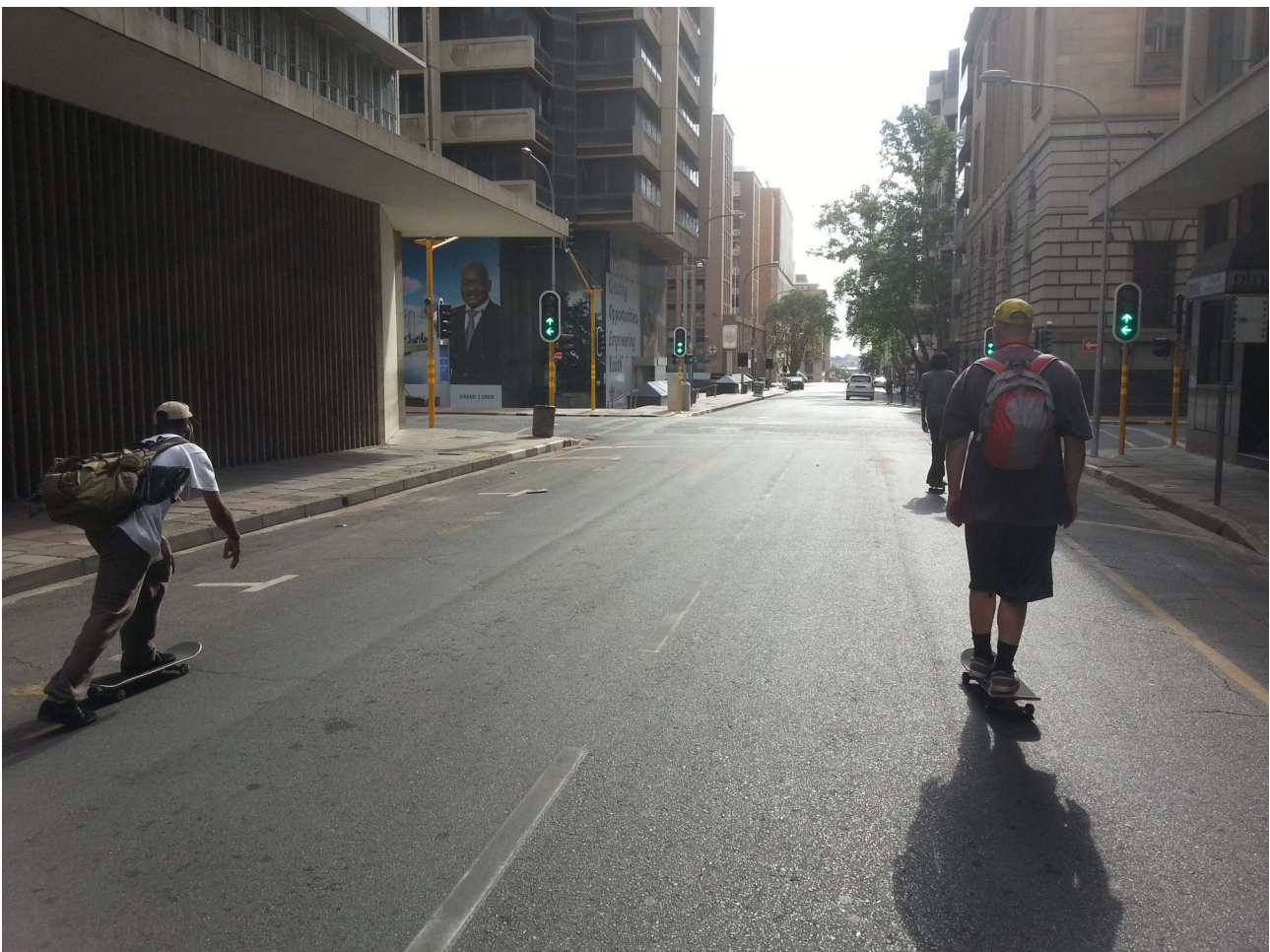


Illustration 17: In Johannesburg I accompanied street skateboarders on their ‘missions’ through the inner city, who relied on public transport, minibus taxis and their skateboards to get around in downtown Johannesburg. The skateboard was quite an efficient and, compared to walking, safe means of transport in the CBD. However, the fact that I was able to provide my car frequently for trips in and around Johannesburg was very welcome as this increased our freedom of movement considerably. Some spots and skateparks were hardly accessible without individual motorised transport.

Despite the various transport options, the mobility of skaters with little economic capital was significantly limited. Class marginalised skaters had to make do with much more cumbersome solutions than class privileged skaters who were dropped off by family members, just took a car parked in their driveway or made use of modern taxi-services like Uber. The lack of mobility options particularly affected young skaters, while at least some older athletes from marginalised class backgrounds had acquired affordable vehicles.¹⁸⁴

Fundamentally, skateboarding could be practised in a large variety of urban environments, therefore the access to particular spaces and places was not necessarily a problem for skill-development as long as athletes had access to concreted and asphalted urban environments, and obstacles that were suited for skateboarding. This point has occasionally been made by NGOs and skateboard activists to claim ease of access to the sport that doesn't require any special facilities. This argument was possibly true regarding skateboarding in urban spaces in the western world, where skaters found countless opportunities to exercise. This was not necessarily the case in South Africa, especially not to the same extent for all South Africans. It should not be forgotten that many South Africans still lived in neglected neighbourhoods which' infrastructure was not or only partly suited for skateboarding. Even in the late 2010s, many townships, that had been once Black group areas, lacked asphalt roads, and roads and public infrastructure were often in poor condition and of low quality. Larger, more elaborate architectural facilities that offered opportunities for street skateboarders could be rarely found there. In the once Black group areas in Cape Town, in contrast to some neighbourhoods once classified as White or Coloured, there were also no skateparks to be found, further deepening the problem of a lack of infrastructure that could be used by skaters. At least in Johannesburg, there were skateparks in townships like Soweto and Alexandra, yet also often in a neglected shape and with skating opportunities in their surrounding. Particularly skateboarders from Black townships often first had to travel to places where they could skate properly. But they were also structurally the most disadvantaged group in terms of available mobility options. Adding to economic discrimination and residential segregation, discrimination in terms of mobility seemed

¹⁸⁴ Lower class skateboarders who owned cars could play an important role in their crews and friendship circles, as they could offer carpooling and thus significantly increase the mobility of fellow skaters. In both Cape Town and Johannesburg, I met older skaters who owned cars and made their cars available almost every weekend to go on skate missions with a larger group of skateboarders. Bakkies in particular were ideal for this purpose, as about a dozen individuals could easily be transported on the flatbed of such a vehicle. Unlike the availability of individual means of transport, however, sharing vehicles required a degree of organisation and often made detours necessary, so that it necessitated an investment of additional time compared to individual transport solutions. The importance of crews also seemed to be higher among skaters of the lower classes partly because it could be a pragmatic solution to the transport problem. It was typical for some class marginalised crews to arrive at skate spots in groups as they shared a car or otherwise travelled collectively. In this sense, class marginalised skaters sometimes seemed to contradict the paradigm of individualism in skateboarding. Especially for them skateboarding was often a collective endeavour that necessitated pooling and sharing resources.

to be a central reason for the relatively low share of Black skateboarders in the South African scene when put into relation to the country's demography.

Mobility inequality had a strong impact on the reproduction of residential segregation and hindered the emergence of diverse skate spots and skateparks. Some places were inaccessible to skaters without access to transport, and thus they did not play a role in these places. They were structurally disadvantaged regarding various opportunities, such as practising in particular architectural environments and building new social networks in these spaces. Mobility inequality thus had direct social consequences for the scene, in which it reproduced or reinforced the inequalities and divisions that existed in society as a whole. Fezile and Thembeke, who worked with class marginalised Black children in Johannesburg's CBD, emphasised in an interview how the limited mobility of many children and youth living in the inner-city of Johannesburg made it practically almost impossible for them to get to certain skate spots and skateparks, but also facilitated the formation of social connections of skaters in certain neighbourhoods who necessarily met each other at the few available spots suitable for skateboarding:

Fezile: So [as a skateboarder from a low-income household] you can't just wake up in the morning and go to Edenvale [a suburb about 6km from Johannesburg's CBD where a popular skatepark was located]. You have to catch like two [minibus] taxis.

Thembeke: Two taxis.

Fezile: It will take two hours. There and back. So that is four hours on the road. And you are just like 'Aaaaah'.

Thembeke: It is also that, that you need money to go.

Fezile: So most of the kids you see know each other based on the fact that they all skate in the same spaces and in the same streets. And there are very few spaces in the city where you can meet and skate if you are not breaking the law.

In the local context, this could lead to articulated distinctions among skaters, in which those who were location-bound due to fewer resources were distinguished as a group from those who were highly mobile due to privileged class position. Or rather, the existing class inequalities were particularly visible in this regard, as they touched on a fundamental resource for all skateboarders, which is mobility. As street skateboarder Ayusch elaborated on the situation in Johannesburg, the unequal access to mobility created a relevant distinction between those for whom the inner city was the centre of their skateboarding, as it was the most accessible place for them, and those who were

highly mobile due to the economic capital at their disposal, riding at times in the inner city but also spending much time skating various spots and skateparks in other parts of the city or country:

Ayusch: Honestly, we know kids and people, some people have more to their disposal. [...] Some guys are mobile, they have cars, they can get to places at will, they don't have to come to town, if they don't want to come. And others of us, the reason we come there [to Johannesburg's CBD], it's the most accessible place. [...] And it's also for the kids, like I say, that stay in the city. That's why they are hitting the city, 'cause they are staying in the city. They don't think let me go here, let me go there, like it's more money, guys don't have cash. Most of the times guys are struggling just to put their board together, you know what I am saying. To get a deck to skate, so the minute they got it, it's like, they can hit the street. Travel, you can use that cash for something else.

As Ayusch emphasised later in the interview, it was “one taxi in, one taxi out” for many Johannesburg skaters when they went to downtown Johannesburg because many minibus taxi routes led from the peripheral neighbourhoods and suburbs to the city centre. But getting to one of the more peripheral neighbourhoods and suburbs was much more expensive and time-consuming, as significantly fewer lines connected, for example, the suburbs located on the edges of the city. In addition, minibus taxes played little role in affluent neighbourhoods except, for example, to bring small numbers of domestic workers, gardeners, and other labourers there, so options were limited. However, mobility was not only influenced by the availability of public transport routes, but also by the way of travelling that was associated with them. Users of cars and motorbikes had significantly different experiences here than those who had to resort to low-cost options. Relying on public transport required dealing with other city dwellers, navigating through traffic and sometimes dodgy taxi ranks, and protecting oneself from potential theft and muggings on the way. So what was a comfortable, quick and safe car ride for many class privileged athletes could be quite a challenging adventure for class marginalised skaters in terms of the time, energy input and risk management required. In my field research, I was able to grasp this by occasionally leaving my rental car and joining skaters travelling on their boards or by public transport. Especially in crime-ridden neighbourhoods, the latter came with quite a number of additional risks and was much more tiring. Of course, this had the consequence, especially for less well-off skaters, that they thought carefully about when to visit which place, as the act of travelling involved respective challenges. It was understandable to me that skateboarding seemed to some South Africans to be a hardly practicable sport, because it was literally difficult to access when locally few skating opportunities could be found and safe, effective means of transport were hardly affordable. Due to the lack of access to

motorised transport, class marginalised skaters also often only visited one or few place(s) of interest during the day, such as a skatepark or spot. Because getting around South Africa's 'automotive cities' without a car consumed a lot of time, energy, thoughtfulness, money and organisational aptitude, visiting different skateparks and skate spots in one day was hardly an option without a car or motorbike. In comparison, for many class privileged skaters I met it was a matter of course to visit different spots and parks on a skate day. Therefore, many class marginalised skateboarders, especially the young ones, rather chose to skate close to where they lived: spots and parks that they could reach on foot or on their board. If they were lucky, like in some neighbourhoods of the Cape Flats, for example Athlone, Valhalla and Mitchell's Plain, and in Johannesburg, for example in Hillbrow, Troyville and Auckland Park, there was a local skatepark or spot of acceptable quality in the vicinity. Otherwise, skaters had to be content with the public urban space they found in front of their doorstep. In any case, the deep inequalities regarding the access to mobility and therefore space facilitated the reproduction of race and class divisions among skateboarders.

5.2.2 Commercial spaces and racialised class exclusion in skateboarding

Certain places were hardly accessible for class marginalised skaters at all due to requiring motorised, individual transport and economic capital to access them. This was particularly the case with many commercial skateparks which usually aimed at a more affluent customer base. Most commercial skateparks were situated in malls or in somehow peripheral areas, and could only comfortably be reached by car. Although some public skate parks also offered bowls and ramps, those who wanted to practice vert effectively often had to visit a commercial park, ideally. Therein lay one of the central reasons why vert skateboarding was much more popular among the class privileged and maintained little relevance among class marginalised skaters, because it required accessibility to skateboarding infrastructure (ramps in particular) that was mostly found in commercial, but seldom in public skateparks (Phasha 2012: 105). As I have illuminated in the historical chapter, South Africa had a long history of (commercial) skateparks being exclusive spaces situated in White group areas that were predominantly accessible to class privileged Whites, but inaccessible for class marginalised South Africans of colour. With the rise of malls as quasi-public spaces offering shopping opportunities and services to the class privileged section of the population from the 1980s onwards (cf. De Vries 2008), skateparks were increasingly built there. In the last great phase of mall skateparks, in the 2000s, the company Boogaloose constructed and ran numerous commercial mall-skateparks in major cities that played a decisive role in providing

infrastructure for the sport. During my fieldwork in the late 2010s, most of these skateparks had vanished just like the company who had built them, and I was only able to visit and skate one last remaining Boogaloose skatepark in the east of Johannesburg. In the meantime, a small number of shopping malls had opened free-to-use skateparks, such as the Waterfront Mall in Cape Town and the Key West Mall east of Johannesburg.¹⁸⁵ In addition, a number of commercial skateparks had been established outside of malls. In the Northern Suburbs of Johannesburg, a Christian NGO ran a commercial facility, in the south-east of Pretoria there was the legendary ‘Thrashers’ skatepark, and in Paarden Eiland, Cape Town, the large indoor skatepark ‘The Shred’ could be found.

Similar to other commercialised spaces, their exclusiveness was built on the exclusion of class marginalised members of society through the economic capital required to get to and make use of them (Phasha 2012: 104). Entrance fees of R20 or R30 for two to three hours sessions and travel costs were simply too expensive for skaters from low-income households. Some street skaters in Johannesburg explained to me that it was not a good deal for them to skate a commercial park instead of skating in the street or in public skateparks, even if they could scratch together the fee for a session. Because for the money they would spent to skate in a commercial park for a couple hours, they could enjoy one or even two full days of skateboarding in public space, including expenses for food and drinks. For some, visiting a commercial skatepark for a day could require investing a whole day’s wage or even more. Accordingly, there was a large group of skateboarders, namely a large number of the class marginalised athletes, who hardly ever used these facilities, would maybe visit them on special occasions and used to prefer to ride in publicly accessible spaces. Some commercial skateparks sporadically also offered time-limited slots or cooperated with NGO projects that temporarily provided class marginalised children and youth free access and sometimes even provided equipment. However, such ventures were of limited nature and in many cases dispatched after a short period of time. After all, commercial skateparks were businesses, not charities.

For middle and upper class South Africans and internationals, on the other hand, the costs for using commercial facilities was quite affordable or even negligible. For those who could afford it, commercial skateparks offered a convenient way to relax for a while and indulge in the sport, away from the risks and challenges in urban public spaces, in exchange for an entrance fee. It was not uncommon for class privileged parents to drop their children off by car at such commercial skateparks, pay the money for a session or two, and fetch their offspring later again. In some malls,

185 In the few freely accessible mall-skateparks, such as at the Waterfront in Cape Town and in Krugersdorp, near Johannesburg, a very diverse crowd of skaters could come together. Some of these parks had become hubs of the local skateboarding scene as the privately secured environment of quasi-public spaces found in malls could provide pleasant and secure meeting spots, and quality facilities. However, this was only the case in those mall parks that were easily accessible on foot or by public transport.

skateparks seemed to play a similar role to playgrounds or other recreational facilities for children and youth. The exclusive and supervised quality of the parks made them quite safe play spaces that could be used by the children while their parents would find the time to go shopping and do other errands. It almost appeared to me that there was practically a separate group of class privileged skaters who mainly skated and socialised in such commercial skateparks but rarely or never in public spaces. Although they were street skateboarders by riding style, as quite a few commercial skateparks offered street obstacles, they stayed away from public urban space and public facilities the marginalised and purist street skateboarders used. The central reason for this was undoubtedly the risks and general stress factors in public spaces.

Accordingly, these skaters maintained little to no contact with the marginalised, but remained spatially and socially in a privileged bubble in which marginalised South Africans appeared as workers who served them, if at all. Thus, in the context of commercial skateparks, divisions and exclusions related to race and class in South African skateboarding became particularly visible. Visiting the websites and social media pages of such commercial facilities, one would often predominantly see White middle class South Africans on photos and videos, illustrating the exclusiveness of these spaces. In this way, skateboarding reflected the general tendency in post-apartheid South African society for commercial facilities to act as socialising spaces for the wealthy (De Fries 2008).

Such racialised class divisions developing in and around commercialised spaces were at times chiefly discussed and addressed by class marginalised skateboarders who consistently experienced exclusion from commercialised spaces first-hand. In an interview, two members of the skate crew 20sk8 from Cape Town harshly criticised the commercial skateboarding event 'Ultimate X', held in the GrandWest Casino in Cape Town in 2017, for excluding lower class skateboarders and, consequently, skaters of colour. To witness the top skateboarders of the country competing in the event, visitors had to pay R250, which was more or less completely unaffordable for a large share of Cape Town's inhabitants. To make a political statement and offer an alternative for lower class skateboarders on the weekend, the crew organised a free contest in the most popular public, inner-city skatepark at the time, in Gardens. The event was titled 'A-Park-Tyd' in the event announcement, a provocative word-play in Afrikaans which translates into something like 'a time in the park', but is pronounced similar to the term 'apartheid', intended to cheekily comment on the racialised class divisions visible in the skateboarding scene in Cape Town. Moreover, according to the public announcement, the aim of the alternative event was to bring skaters in the segregated city together in one place:

“The Apartheid era divided our beautiful country; racial segregation and discrimination impacted the people of South Africa immensely. Many laws were passed and people were forcefully removed from their homes. A-Park-Tyd is aimed at uniting the Cape Town skateboarding community regardless of their race, culture or economic circumstances.”¹⁸⁶

Yet, contrary to the stated intention, on the day of the event the racialised class divisions in the local skate scene were particularly highlighted as the event was predominantly visited by the city’s marginalised skaters of colour and their friends coming together, as one of the event organisers explained in an interview:

Michael: Ya, we are referencing Apartheid completely, A-Park-Tyd. But we of course like bring it back, like, unifying skateboarders or, you need skateboarding to unify people. When there was like 90% Coloured people at our skate competition. There wasn’t, there was one White person.

Interviewer: Really?

Michael: Ya, there was one, there was only one White person. I promise you like, on a hand, like on a count, one White person. There was like 250 people.

In contrast, the crowd at the commercial contest, which I was able to attend for free thanks to an invitation, was predominantly class privileged and White. Practically emphasising the issue of social divisions addressed by the skateboarding activists, overlapping race and class divisions in the local skateboarding scene became particularly visible with the two events taking place at the same time. In South Africa, and this does not exclude skateboarding, spaces occupied by the affluent were mostly White dominated spaces from which South Africans of colour were structurally excluded. Commercial contexts highlighted how race and class divisions no longer resulted from the politics of a racist state, but from overlapping race and class positions in a society characterised by extreme economic inequality and residential segregation, and through the simple fact that an economically well-off minority could easily shield itself effectively from an economically marginalised majority in commercialised and hard-to-reach spaces (Mbembe 2008: 15ff.; Schensul/Heller 2010: 1; Seekings 2011: 28ff.; Sulla/Zikhali 2018: 22f.).

186 Twentyskeight (07.02.2017): The Apartheid era divided our beautiful country; racial segregation and discrimination impacted the people of South Africa immensely [event announcement], Instagram, online-source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BQNXR7fjQvM/> [accessed: 13.08.2019].

5.2.3 Violent crime as an obstacle to social integration: the case of the Cape Flats

A third aspect structurally facilitating the reproduction of racialised class divisions among South African skateboarders was the unequal distribution of violent contact crime in the segregated urban landscape. I illuminate this aspect by taking a closer look at the situation among skateboarders in Cape Town. Among the most pressing and publicly debated issues in Cape Town were the extreme poverty of residents, and the escalating violent crime and gangsterism in the Cape Flats. Both phenomena were directly related to each other. Despite the political liberation of its inhabitants with the introduction of democracy, a large part of the Cape Flats' residents still lived in deep poverty (Payn 2011: 119). In fact, not much had changed to the better in the lives of many residents after 1994 who had survived the harsh and violent realities the apartheid state had created in the decades before. The six years immediately after transformation had already seen a significant rise of crime in Cape Town, whereby the privileged areas had been affected the least from it (Lemanski 2004: 103f.). Due to the high number of muggings, car-hijackings, robberies and homicides, some areas of the Cape Flats were counted among the most dangerous places in the world in the 2010s (Van Niekerk et. al. 2015: 1; Vigneswaran 2014: 472). High rates of sexual violence affected particularly girls and women as well as gays, lesbians and queers in public spaces (Maluleke 2018). A particularly feared phenomenon was the high presence of gangs in the Cape Flats. About 83% of South Africa's statistically registered gang related murders occurred in the Western Cape area.¹⁸⁷ Informed commentators, like Don Pinnock, found depressing words for this situation:

“In overcrowded townships the chance of death by violence is now higher than in some of the world's most volatile war zones. Here statistics trump hyperbole. In one year, between April 2014 and March 2015, there were six murders and seven attempted murders a day, 30637 reported assaults (84 a day). Most of the victims and perpetrators are young men labelled under apartheid as coloured or black.” (Pinnock 2016: 4)

Although the first gangs had already emerged in working class neighbourhoods in the 1940s, they did not become a major force until the 1980s when prison and street gangs grew in size and increasingly merged (Jensen 2006: 282; Pinnock 2016: 19f.; Steinberg 2004: 281). In the decades that followed, the number of gang members rose sharply, so that in the 2010s there was talk of

¹⁸⁷ Plato, Dan (11.08.2018): Statement by Minister Dan Plato – Crime Statistics 2018, Western Cape Government, online-source: <https://www.westerncape.gov.za/news/statement-minister-dan-plato-crime-statistics-2018> [accessed: 13.07.2019].

several ten-thousand gang members in Cape Town alone¹⁸⁸, with an almost indeterminable, larger number of people involved in gang-associated activities. Gangsterism, as it was locally often termed, was constantly a topic in public discourse as one of the most pressing issues of the city and attention in the fight against it was focused primarily on young men of colour who were over-represented among the perpetrators of violent and gang crime (Samara 2011: 18f.). Fundamentally, gangs could be understood as business entities in informal and illegal economies, as the major activities of gangs circulated drug and arms trafficking, and other illegal activities, such as abalone poaching, burglaries, robberies, car theft, extortion of protection money and illicit cigarette trade. Gangs thus offered a quite tangible economic income to their members. As a number of my acquaintances from the Cape Flats who had been involved with gangs in the past and witnessed gang activities in their neighbourhoods emphasised to me, boys and young men often got involved in the gang business due to a lack of alternatives to make a (decent) living, not because they strived for a gangster lifestyle. As Samuel, who had a couple (former) gang members in his circle of friends, explained to me, “most gangsters don’t want to be gangsters” (cf. Hall 1978: 353; Jensen 2010: 81; Pinnock 2016: 5, 17). After all, joining a gang was no walk in the park, but a tough business, especially for (young) members of the lower ranks in a gang’s hierarchy. The life of many gangsters was fast and exciting, but also dangerous, grim, bleak and not seldom short. Gangsterism was, in a sense, a brutal symptom of a lack of pathways out of existential poverty in post-apartheid South Africa.

Common to the gangs’ business activities was that they involved the use of (deadly) violence. It was the drug trade in particular that caused violent conflicts between gangs competing over local markets. The use of excessive force was an important tool in such an environment where respect and a feared reputation had to be built in order to gain an upper hand (Jensen 2008: 58; cf. Anderson 1999: 33f.; Wacquant 2008: 68f.). Some neighbourhoods like Nyanga, Philippi, Elsie’s River, Mitchell’s Plain and Delft were particularly known for a high presence of gangs and recurring escalations of gang wars that were often fought with small firearms. In fact, some neighbourhoods seemed to be under the control of gangs as they had the monopoly on violence in their hands there. Despite their problematic impact, gangs did often play an ambivalent role in the neighbourhoods, being mostly detested and condemned, but at times accepted and appreciated among residents¹⁸⁹

188 Dziejewski, Dariusz (09.08.2020): The Cape Town gangsters who use extreme violence to operate solo, The Conversation, online-source: <https://theconversation.com/the-cape-town-gangsters-who-use-extreme-violence-to-operate-solo-143750> [accessed: 11.11.2020].

189 Gang members were, after all, part of the neighbourhood community and, as acquaintances from some Cape Flats neighbourhoods told me, they sometimes engaged in philanthropy, distributing food or other necessities to families in economic need, or made themselves useful in other ways. Because gangs virtually controlled the monopoly on violence in some neighbourhoods, they sometimes intervened to settle conflicts or brought criminals to justice who

(Jensen 2008: 97; Samara 2011: 99f.). Yet, gangs spread fear and terror, and caused the death of bystanders, among them children (cf. Van Niekerk et. al. 2015: 2). The news in Cape Town was full of reports on gang violence and its victims. Acquaintances who lived in the Cape Flats repeatedly spoke to me about outbreaks of violence. I remember very well how one day I met my skateboarding mentor Arnie from Elsie's Rivier and he seemed quite downhearted. When I asked him what was bothering him, he told me that a few days earlier several children in his neighbourhood had been shot and killed in the course of a gang-war. While such events would have caused a scandal and immediate intervention in other contexts, this was not an isolated incident in the Cape Flats at the time, but rather a recurring tragedy with the state and the city government being unable or unwilling to take effective measures. Resident groups expressed their frustration at the persistent, fear-inducing situation in their neighbourhoods restricting fundamental freedoms in recurring demonstrations and protests. In this context, a civic organisation from the Cape Flats neighbourhood Bonteheuwel, at the time one hotspot of gang related violence in the Western Cape, issued a statement outlining the brutal realities and its comprehensive consequences in 2018 (cf. Jensen 2008: 63). The violence emanating from the gangs curtailed basic civil rights, especially the right to move freely in public (Pinnock 2016: 5). As the group pointed out, it was especially children and young people who were deprived of opportunities to play and explore in their neighbourhoods:

“Children and youth on the Cape Flats are living in fear and absolute despair due to uncontrolled gang violence. [...] We are being terrorised and held hostage by inscupulous gangsters in the area, with shooting incidents day and night. Children are not allowed in parks or on the streets to play. Children are not allowed to be carefree or free.”¹⁹⁰

The amount of psychological stress and trauma caused by experiences of violence by residents of corresponding neighbourhoods, who had to manage a severe social crisis culminating in unpredictable, deadly violence practically on a daily basis, was certainly immense. The city government's response to the gang-problem was focused on sporadically fighting the symptoms of gang violence while leaving the structural causes of the problem out of the equation and offering little support to residents in crime-ridden areas (Samara 2011: 100f.). At times, the fight against the

were not bothered by the police.

190 Dolley, Caryn (13.07.2018): Cape Town's children – a generation at gang gunpoint, news24, online-source: <https://www.news24.com/news24/columnists/guestcolumn/cape-towns-children-a-generation-at-gang-gunpoint-20180713> [accessed: 3.9.2020].

symptoms took on enormous proportions, which made the drastic nature of the problem particularly clear. In July 2019, for example, military units were deployed in some areas of the Cape Flats to combat increasingly out-of-control gang violence, as the police no longer seemed able to do so.¹⁹¹ The escalation of violent crime, as the deployment of the military indicated, was facilitated by the inability of the police to get the problem under control in the most marginalised areas. There, the police forces seemed to be the least reliable in them due to a lack of numbers and corruption among police officers (Jensen 208: 120f.; Lemanski 2004: 104). I could hardly overlook in my research the population's lack of trust in the police forces, which were said to be involved in gang-crimes in some areas themselves (cf. Jensen 2008: 120). The police, it seemed, could simply not be relied upon. With no effective support by the state in an extremely violent situation, some residents resorted to vigilante justice and asked for the help of vigilant groups like the infamous PAGAD (cf. Monaghan 2007). The city government seemed to be satisfied with keeping gangsterism and excessive violent crime away from privileged neighbourhoods, but was not necessarily able to effectively confront it where they constituted the most severe problem (Pinnock 2016: 5; Samara 2011: 4). In the Cape Flats, in other words, a large scale tragedy was taking place on a daily basis, which the government was merely containing so that it did not spill over into the privileged parts of the city. A long term solution to the complex problem of violence and violent crime did not seem to be in sight (Jensen 2006: 283; Jensen 2010: 86).

The Cape Flats seemed to be an urban space similar to what Wacquant had termed “hyperghetto” (Wacquant 1988: 61f.) and space of “advanced marginality” (Wacquant 1988: 262). A place to which the racially oppressed had once been banished, but which in neoliberal South Africa was primarily constituted as a place of banishment for the poor population, which, though, consisted almost solely of South Africans of colour, the once oppressed and their descendants. Various destructive effects and symptoms of existential poverty were unleashed in the Cape Flats, among which gang and violent crime were the most visible and brutal. The Cape Flats were a place that was terrifying because it continuously claimed lives and offered little hope, a place that many preferred to leave when they found the opportunity to do so.¹⁹² Many Cape Flats residents did not have this opportunity and had to cope with the conditions as they were.

191 Luckhoff, Paula (13.07.2019): Nyanga CPF welcomes army presence while SU's Ntsikelelo Breakfast warns officers' military training could backfire, Capetalk, online-source: <http://www.capetalk.co.za/articles/354690/cape-sandf-deployment-crime-deterrent-or-a-case-of-hell-might-break-loose> [accessed: 13.07.2019].

192 In fact, I met numerous informants who wished above all to be able to turn their backs on the Cape Flats, or who were happy to have found work overseas and to be able to live in an environment where violent crime had not reached excessive levels. For families forced by gentrification or other reasons to move from neighbourhoods close to the inner-city to Cape Flats neighbourhoods where rents were affordable, such a move could amount to an enormous hardship: Hardly anyone I got to know did it voluntarily.

However, the gang-driven violent crime affected everybody in the city. Of course, residents in gang hotspots were most directly affected by the brutal effects of violent crime. In the privileged neighbourhoods, the violent crime was much less of an issue (Kynoch 2005: 493f.; Lemanski 2004: 104). However, gang violence also affected wealthy residents in their residential areas, not only by forcing them to increase their safety through hired private security services, security architecture and alarm systems (Lemanski 2004: 106), but also by fundamentally curtailing their freedom of movement, and causing fear of violent robberies and burglaries (Lemanski 2004: 105). Although gang crime was largely kept out of the privileged neighbourhoods and thus concentrated in the poor parts of the city, this did not prevent gangs and other criminals from looking sporadically for lucrative opportunities especially in wealthy areas, and deliberately targeting wealthy(-looking) individuals in public space. Moreover, fear of violence led wealthy and especially White South Africans to particularly avoid neighbourhoods and areas that were considered crime hotspots, which in the context of Cape Town was particularly true of the Cape Flats. Rampant (violent) crime ultimately affected all residents of the city, albeit in different and unequal ways.

Violent crime and gang crime fundamentally affected all skateboarders' opportunities to access and use certain spaces, and therefore played a central role in the (re)production of social divisions and inequalities. For skateboarders in South Africa, handling violent crime was certainly the biggest obstacle, as it severely restricted the use of public space through life-threatening risks. However, since the extent of violent crime in urban spaces was unevenly distributed, with the poorest neighbourhoods usually being the most affected by it, certain spaces were more likely to be frequented by skaters than others, depending on the (perceived) risks. In my field research, this was evident in the fact that despite the majority of skateparks in Cape Town being located in Cape Flats neighbourhoods, these skateparks were not 'on the map' of many skaters in Cape Town. A selected number of skateparks I visited regularly during my fieldwork stay, allowing me to knit some connections to local skateboarders, learn about their perspectives on social aspects of skateboarding in Cape Town and learn about the local situation. Almost all skateparks in the Cape Flats differed from skateparks in the inner-city areas in two fundamental regards. They were often, despite two exceptions, of poor quality, questionable design and badly maintained (Morgan 2013). And, in contrast to the skateparks in the privileged areas of the city, they often did hardly develop any race and class diversity among visitors as they were predominantly used by locals. Yet, this was somehow remarkable as two skateparks, a skatepark in Valhalla park and a skatepark in Athlone, were known by skaters throughout the city due to their exceptional construction quality and unique design. Both facilities were not too far from the city's CBD and therefore not too hard to access

from various areas. Yet, particularly Valhalla was known to not be frequented by inner-city and particularly White skaters. The demographic composition of skateboarders in skateparks in the Cape Flats typically mirrored the demographic composition of the neighbourhoods in which they were situated. Unlike the public skateparks in the inner-city, that were visited by a rather diverse demographic of skateboarders as I will explain in more detail later, these facilities were not ‘integrated spaces’ bringing skateboarders from different neighbourhoods and, particularly in segregated society, social positions together.

While in some cases the poor quality and often standardised design of the skateparks played a role in making them simply not worthwhile destinations for skaters to visit them from afar, a way more weighty reason why many Capetonian skateboarders did not visit skateparks in the Cape Flats was that the very high crime rate and the gang-problem in many neighbourhoods made it too risky and unpleasant to visit them. Among skateboarders residing in the inner-city of Cape Town and in the Northern and Southern Suburbs, the Cape Flats were often regarded as generally too dangerous and not worthy to travel to, as the risk to get mugged, hijacked, assaulted or even killed on the way, or in and around skateparks, was perceived as too high. When visiting and spending time with skateboarders in the Cape Flats, I became constantly aware of this myself. Driving in a car through some of the neighbourhoods in the Cape Flats, especially alone and in the dark, could be a somewhat unsettling experience because of the ever-present risk of becoming a victim of crime. As a recognisably non-resident, for example due to racialised ascription¹⁹³, one could quickly attract attention as an outsider and could thus, as some locals warned me, also become a victim of crime even more quickly. Moving relaxed on a skateboard through the streets of Cape Flats neighbourhoods was therefore hardly advisable, especially as a stranger with no deeper knowledge of the local situation. Travelling to and spending time in public in Cape Flats neighbourhoods as an outsider required good nerves, good acquaintances and ideally the ability to assert oneself with a cool habitus and mastery of local slang. Yet, even under such premises travelling and spending time in public in the Cape Flats remained a risky endeavour. Not all South Africans, and certainly not all internationals, were able or willing to take such risks for recreational skateboarding. Instead, many

193 I was warned about this several times by locals in Cape Town who felt that as a White foreigner I was at increased risk of muggings and hijackings in the Cape Flats. Moreover, I well remember on my first visit getting a ‘car tour’ of some Cape Flats neighbourhoods by a sports sociologist I had met in Cape Town and her brother. Both were Ghanaians but had moved to South Africa with their family (their father worked for the ANC). The sociologist was greatly interested in my research topic and proposed to show me around the different neighbourhoods in Cape Town and visit some of the skateboarding facilities. As we drove through Hanover Park, my acquaintance’s brother who was driving the car was struck by fear at some point and decided to end the trip early. Slowly and ‘cool’, but determined, he steered the car onto the next main road to leave the neighbourhood by the quickest route. Both explained to me that two Black Ghanaians and a White German travelling together in a car in a Coloured neighbourhood might attract too much attention and increase the risk to become victim of a hijacking.

chose to stay away from certain neighbourhoods of the Cape Flats and skate spaces in neighbourhoods with lower crime rates.

Particularly for skateboarders of class privileged backgrounds residing in the inner-city, and Northern and Southern Suburbs, the Cape Flats seemed to sometimes not even exist on the 'map' of potential skate spaces at all. When I asked such skaters if they had visited certain spots or skateparks in the flats, my question was occasionally met with irritation, disbelief or amusement: it was unthinkable or even an absurd thought for many to do so. In this respect, skateboarding also reflected a dynamic that could be observed city-wide and created the impression that Cape Town was a truly divided city, in which the wealthy in the beautiful areas shielded themselves from the poor majority and their problems, and were not interested in the life of this majority either, but kept it as far away from it as possible. Some wealthy Capetonians I met had never set foot in the Cape Flats in their lives, even though they were just a 15 minute drive away. Some of the more streetwise street skateboarders residing in the inner-city visited the Cape Flats seldom for certain spots on specific occasions, for example to shoot footage for skate videos or to visit rare public events, but not to just skate them in their free time and hang out. Brian aptly described the situation on the basis of his experiences as a street skateboarder in Cape Town and Johannesburg:

Brian: You have the aspect of where the skate stuff is, right? So inner city like Cape Town where there are parks behind the mountain and there are parks in the city. People have a choice. So if you live there and it is mission to get to town, you don't have to come to town, you can skate a park there. And if you live in the city, you can skate here because it is convenient for you. [...] They are from two different areas, they have places to skate each in their area, but they won't necessarily go. But then, the other way around, people in the city don't necessarily go to the Cape Flats, because it is perceived to be dangerous. But that doesn't mean they don't want to on racial lines, it has more to do with they don't feel safe going there.

Interviewer: I see.

Brian: Because of all the stories that have been told, and the violence and all that. And I understand why they don't want to. Same thing in Johannesburg. You won't get like maybe White kids from the suburbs going to the skatepark in Alex or in Soweto.

Interviewer: Hmm.

Brian: But there are people that do, often. But the majority of people, if your parents like, if you need your parents to drop you off, for example, and they perceive that area as dangerous they are not gonna to drop you off there. So there is that divide in terms of like historical perception of safety and economic background.

Even some skaters who were residing themselves in the Cape Flats were reluctant to visit skateparks in certain other Cape Flats neighbourhoods due to crime and existing local rivalries. In areas such as Valhalla Park, I was told by activists working there, kids from adjacent neighbourhoods were at times physically attacked when visiting the skatepark located there. An NGO skate coach who lived two neighbourhoods away got into recurring trouble when he rode his board to the skatepark where the programme was held, so he occasionally preferred to be picked up by car. In general, the tense security situation caused by violent crime and gang activity made also residents of the Cape Flats careful regarding visits to other Cape Flats' areas and generally when moving through public space. If certain areas were known to be part of the territory of certain gangs, such as the 28s, they were regarded as particularly unsafe for visiting outsiders, as Michael pointed out in an interview:

Michael: When you see that 2 and that 8 you know like, when you see a 2 and an 8, if someone tell you 'ey, the agt en twintig is there on the corner', you don't walk there at the corner. Everyone know 'ey, the agt en twintig was there at the corner' except for if you know them, you can go there, otherwise you don't go there.

Interviewer: It's their territory?

Michael: Ya, it's their territory, you don't, if you are not known there and they don't know you, you don't go where the agt en twintig is.

In such areas, it was considered very risky or even foolish to spend time in public space when not knowing one's way around and maintaining contacts with locals. Everyone in Cape Town feared the gangs and no amount of streetwiseness could protect against the unpredictable outbreaks of violence that emanated from them. As Joel put it, it was therefore not an option in South Africa to visit public places if one did not exactly know what was going on there:

Joel: Yeah, exactly, different neighbourhoods where nobody goes to as well. It's the same thing with that. They [skateparks in these neighbourhoods] are beautifully built, those ones are amazing, but it's like they are in such bad places that like no one can go there actually without like, consistently, practically, because it's not the type of place you want to be around.

Interviewer: I mean like because of the dangers, the safety.

Joel: Yeah, yeah, all of that. Like I have heard stories, I was like, I don't get it dude, it's just a skatepark, even if it's in a dodgy area, and then dudes are like 'nah, dude' even if you are skater, even worse, it's like, I don't know what goes on there.

Unlike societies with low crime rates, in South Africa it was not advisable to stroll in neighbourhoods that one did not have a basic knowledge about. Skaters in Cape Town and Johannesburg could not explore urban space in the same relaxed fashion as skaters in less crime-ridden cities in other parts of the world (cf. Schweer 2014: 71). Particularly in crime-ridden areas like the Cape Flats, even if one knew one's way around there, skateboarding could be quite strenuous. Because potentially something could always happen, one had to be constantly awake to react in time when trouble was looming. While it was possible to lower the risks to get into dodgy situations in the first place, especially by building ties to other locals, following the 'code of the street', forming groups and employing countless other, small strategies to improve safety, it was not possible to have a similar carefree skateboarding experience as in skateparks in safer neighbourhoods and commercial facilities shielded from public space (cf. Reihling 2020: 42). Cape Flats skaters who pursued their sport under the given circumstances therefore faced considerable and at times life-threatening risks. In this regard, I was struck by a social media post by the skate collective ElsieSkates from Elsie's Rivier mentioning, a neighbourhood that at the time of my fieldwork was ravaged by severe gang violence:

"Yoyo ElsieSkates identify with the struggle.

Our kids don't got the finance to keep up with the industry but they got the vigor to kill it. Broken shoes and a busted deck. Your board snap you want to cry because its another hit in the pocket but your torpie is then on drugs no board for you. Rich areas got the safe vibes and the kwaai vert. Heir in die Elsies its like you rolling around in a desert. Skate the long way around cause in The Range there's flying bullets. In Vahalla its permy a gamble to skate, last time I was there the chased a bra with a spade.

But guess wat...

WE STILL SKATIIINNG!!! bwaahahaha"¹⁹⁴

Despite such confident statements, not few skaters from the Cape Flats therefore preferred skating facilities in better off neighbourhoods in or close to the CBD, as they could train and hang out there in a more focused and carefree way, and meet a diverse crowd of skateboarders from various parts of the city. In Cape Town, if one had the opportunity to get to skateparks in privileged

194 Elsie's Skates (08.03.2016): Yoyo ElsieSkates identify with the struggle [facebook post], facebook, online-source: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=240196262990555&id=100010005494513 [accessed: 27.11.2017].

neighbourhoods, this was usually the safest and therefore most relaxed option due to the lower crime rate, and the more reliable police and private security.

Even skateparks of excellent quality could therefore hardly attract skaters to the marginalised parts of the city. While many skaters from the Cape Flats welcomed the construction of quality parks but bemoaned their limited use due to rampant violent crime, many skaters from the inner city regarded the construction of quality skateparks in the ‘Flats’ an outright waste of resources. Some skateboarders in Cape Town openly criticised the building of skateparks in crime-ridden neighbourhoods due to their quite limited accessibility for non-residential skaters. In a facebook discussion about skateparks in Cape Town, a skater vented his anger about this aspect:

“When we say we need skateparks we need skateparks to be built at a mutual and easy venue for all skateboarders not in impoverished communities or gang ridden areas that shit doesnt work for us !!!! Whoever decide to build valhalla skatepark in valhalla should suck a dick!!”¹⁹⁵

Valhalla Park, a neighbourhood once categorised as Coloured during apartheid, was well-known for its particularly high crime rate and acute gang problem. Yet, urban planners had chosen to build one of the biggest quality skateparks there. It was seldom used as intended. Only a tiny number of local skateboarders and very few streetwise skateboarders from other parts of the city, including a small number of skate veterans from adjacent neighbourhoods mentoring local kids and NGO-workers offering weekly two-hour-workshops in the park financed through a public social fund, were making use of it. Outside the scheduled NGO program, one often saw children playing without skateboards (or BMX bikes), some at least riding the park on wooden, self-made scooters. Despite many of the local children and youth being quite interested in skateboarding, the NGO program was very well attended, most neighbourhood’s residents were extremely poor and could simply not afford skateboarding equipment.¹⁹⁶

The city’s attempt to create a safe recreational environment with the skatepark was therefore largely considered a failure due to being too dangerous to skate because of the violent crime in the area. Valhalla park, a masterpiece of skateboarding architecture, was sitting amidst what was called “a lion’s den” in the short film *Jas Boude*¹⁹⁷, hinting at the massive gang-problem the area was known for. What could have been a wonderful recreational facility attracting athletes from all over the city,

195 Skate Collective (13.06.2018): Cape Town skateparks [facebook post], facebook, online-source: <https://www.facebook.com/skatecollective/posts/1817544394969941bb> [accessed: 25.4.2019].

196 I visited the park numerous times together with the NGO and participated in the skate workshops. I also visited the park numerous times with different skaters at different times. The children attending the NGO program completely depended on the NGO programs and were unable to skate on their own as they lacked the gear.

had turned into an extreme case of a white elephant in the South African context. The barely frequented park in the middle of a crime-ridden neighbourhood did certainly not provide ideal preconditions for being visited by skaters from other parts of the city. Skaters from other areas of the city and especially White skateboarders seemed often to feel uncomfortable in the setting of the skatepark, as one commenter voiced on the aforementioned discussion on facebook:

“Valhalla - amazing park, lots of fun. Kids running around all over the park throwing stones, bottles, etc. Kids grabbing your board everytime you fall or constantly nagging for it. Was asked, multiple times, what a white boy is doing there.”¹⁹⁸

I could, to a degree, relate to this impression during my visits together with locally networked skaters. Even though I never had any negative experiences with children or adults in and around the skatepark in Valhalla Park. To the contrary, I met very friendly, communicative, tolerant and open-minded children, teenagers and young men, and parents there. But the grinding poverty in the neighbourhood, the gang graffiti found here and there in the park, and the knowledge of standing out as a stranger and foreigner had an intimidating effect. This did not change after a skateboard trainer from the NGO working there told me that among the direct residents of the park, who at times sat in front of their houses and watched the activity in the park, were active gang members. Without the company of well-intentioned, local skateboarders familiar with the neighbourhood, this was not a setting in which one felt invited to relax and have a carefree time. Several skateparks in the Cape Flats suffered from the same basic issue, and local skate activists and NGOs recurrently talked over possibilities to ‘activate’ underused skateparks to turn them into safer spaces. In neighbourhoods with high crime rates, skateparks could only really be used by locals and outsiders if they were well frequented, as the more or less spontaneously created collectives of skaters could facilitate safety from potential risks and dangers. Creating safe spaces through grouping up, which I had described in more detail earlier as an important survival strategy of street skateboarders, was central for the ‘activation’ of skateparks in crime-ridden neighbourhoods. Deserted and barely used skateparks, in fact, were not only dead infrastructure, but could even worsen the safety situation in their vicinity, as a lack of visitors and users reduced the social control in the environments where they were built. If a sufficiently large local skateboarding community could not emerge to turn local parks into safe spaces that locals and outsiders could come to, some NGOs attempted to provide the

197 Jas Boude the Film (01.03.2016): Jas Boude [video], Youtube, online-source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vTCMfNqeTI> [accessed: 10.7.2020].

198 Skate Collective (13.06.2018): Cape Town skateparks [facebook post], facebook, online-source: <https://www.facebook.com/skatecollective/posts/1817544394969941bb> [accessed: 25.4.2019].

human and material resources with skateboard workshops to breathe some life into these spaces. However, this activism had its limits and outside of the workshop-sessions skateparks like Valhalla Park quickly returned to their barely used, unsafe state.

I therefore identified rampant poverty in an extremely unequal society and a high crime rate as major contributors for the reproduction of socio-spatial segregation within the Capetonian skateboarding scene. Crime massively hindered the free mobility of skateboarders generally. Its uneven distribution in urban space turned certain spaces into (perceived) high-risk spaces for outsiders and even some locals. Since the risk of becoming a victim of violent crime was particularly high in class marginalised neighbourhoods, it was especially in these neighbourhoods that barely any integrated skateboarding spaces could develop. While in marginalised neighbourhoods some local skaters connected to the wider skate scene by visiting skate spaces in more privileged neighbourhoods, skaters from poor households and children in particular, who could not easily travel to other neighbourhoods, stayed among themselves, because their neighbourhoods were hardly visited by skaters from elsewhere. The uneven distribution of crime in the city thus contributed to a reinforcement of the racialised class divisions in a residentially segregated environment. As I will show in the next section, in Cape Town, skateboarding spaces with a more diverse range of visitors were located in class privileged neighbourhoods that had been mostly classified as White during apartheid, and were residentially still dominated by White South Africans and internationals in the late 2010s. Even though socio-spatial dynamics in Johannesburg maintained many similarities in this regard, in Johannesburg a well-known, integrated skate spot had developed in a marginalised urban public space in the inner-city. In the following section, I will go into more detail about more integrated skateboarding spaces in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

5.2.4 Class and race diverse skate spots and skateparks in Cape Town and Johannesburg

Due to the described relevance of residential segregation, unequal access to mobility and the high rate of crime distributed unevenly throughout urban space, only certain skate spots and skateparks provided the conditions to develop into race and class diverse social spaces in Cape Town and Johannesburg. In the following, I will elaborate on such spaces that I had encountered in both cities. In Cape Town, the Mill Street (or Gardens) skatepark and a skatepark on the premises of the Salesian Institute, both located in the city's CBD, had become well-used, public facilities and meeting spots for urban athletes from many different areas. In Johannesburg, the skate spot LBGs, situated in the infamous old CBD, had developed into a remarkable example of an informal skate

space that provided a well frequented, diverse skateboarding space in the bustling metropolis. Both spaces had in common that they were centrally located in the city, but they exhibited numerous differences, which I will discuss in more detail below. A closer look at both cases yields further insight into the possibilities and limitations of the creation of integrated social spaces through an urban youth culture and sport like skateboarding.

In terms of skateboarding, Johannesburg and Cape Town differed in one important aspect: In Johannesburg, no public skateparks could be found in the vicinity of the inner-city when I conducted fieldwork in 2016 and 2017. There were only a few quasi-public and private facilities. In Hillbrow, the NGO One Love Skateboarding¹⁹⁹ operated a publicly accessible skatepark and offered skateboarding workshops to children. Yet, due to the high rate of violent crime in the neighbourhood and because the park was located in close proximity to a taxi rank, it had the reputation of being a rather ‘dodgy’ place²⁰⁰ and was therefore primarily used by locals familiar with the neighbourhood. In Maboneng, a skatepark was run by the NGO Skateistan²⁰¹ that was exclusively used for workshops by the NGO and not publicly accessible²⁰². In Johannesburg, publicly accessible skateparks were only found on the outskirts of the CBD or slightly outside the city, such as in Germiston, at the Key West Mall and in Edenvale. Several commercial skateparks could be found in middle class suburbs in the north and east, yet, due to hard accessibility by public transport and entrance fees they were rarely visited by class marginalised skateboarders. In contrast to Cape Town, there were no public skateparks in downtown Johannesburg where a diverse skate scene could have gathered. Only in 2018, two public skateparks were opened that were in relative vicinity to the city centre. A plaza with some vert elements had been built in Empire Road near the University of the Witwatersrand. In Westdene, a suburb west of the city centre, a fairly high-quality skate plaza was opened to the public in Tighy Park. These two parks were the closest to bringing together a diverse crowd from different parts of the city, as they were rather easy to get to from a wide array of areas and did not require further expenses to be used. Both parks quickly gained great popularity in the local scene and established themselves as meeting places. However, as I was only able to visit the two new parks for only a few times in 2018, I am omitting them from this

199 One Love Central (2021): Profile page, facebook, online-source:

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Nonprofit-Organization/One-Love-Central-1041362199311913/>
[accessed: 29.9.2021].

200 Sadly, an activist from the NGO was stabbed in the skatepark in 2017 and succumbed to his injuries.

201 Skateistan (2021): Johannesburg [website], Skateistan, online-source: <https://skateistan.org/location/southafrica>
[accessed: 29.9.2021].

202 In fact, many street skateboarders in Johannesburg were very critical of the NGO's activities. Basically, they welcomed the fact that the NGO enabled marginalised children to skateboard. At the same time, many skaters could not understand that the skate park was not made accessible to the public in order to promote the local skate scene, which suffered from a lack of skate parks in the inner city.

examination. However, they clearly indicated that skateboarding was increasingly being integrated in the design and planning of recreational infrastructure.

Until 2017, however, Johannesburg was best known for the nationally renowned skate spot Library Gardens/Beyr Maude Square, which was known among South African skaters by the short form 'LBGs'. After only a few days in Johannesburg, I learned about this place, which was described to me as 'THE meeting place' for the city's street skateboarders. The spot had been 'discovered' by street skateboarders in the early 1990s, and developed into a well-established skate spot for the local scene since the 2000s. Countless South African street videos featured clips shot on the square, which had made it nationally famous. The space remained an important meeting point for street skaters until mid-2017, when the municipal government demarcated the spot with a fence, architecturally excluding the skateboarders. Until then, it was a remarkably diverse place, with skateboarders coming together from many parts of the city. That such a place had established itself in the middle of downtown Johannesburg seemed remarkable to me. After all, the inner city was notorious for its high crime rate and had a fearsome reputation (cf. Kruger 2006: 142).

Yet, LBGs was surprisingly a true public relaxation space in the middle of the bustling and at-times fear-inducing metropolis. Surrounded by high-rise buildings and enclosed by three- and four-lane roads, the representative Duncan Hall building and the National Library building closed the plaza off on its west and east side. Numerous empty, run-down buildings surrounding LBGs symbolised the general decay caused by economic demise of this part of Johannesburg. A high-rise building on the north-east side of the square seemed almost threatening. The entrances were bricked up, but one could see that it had already been 'gutted', as ceiling panels and cable remnants dangled down inside the building. The square itself had seen several revamps and name changes over the decades. It's foundations were laid when the area was used as a market in the late 19th century, it was known as Market Square until 1915, when its name was changed to City Hall Gardens. In 1935, the building of the public library was opened and in 1939 the plaza's name was changed again to Library Gardens, only to be named Harry Hofmeyr Gardens later the same year. Since the early 20th century, the square had been a well-known place for protest gatherings²⁰³ (Keeling 2008: 27). At the time of my fieldwork, the plaza was known as Beyers Naude Square, honouring the anti-apartheid activist²⁰⁴. The square had also underwent numerous architectural and design changes. For

203 Luke Jackson, writer and editor of *Session* magazine, having grown up in Johannesburg, had edited the short-film "The LBGs Mixtape" that was informing about the history of the plaza. It was a remarkable piece that connected the history of the plaza to the history of local skateboarding, and illustrated the relevance LBGs had to the local scene: *TheReprobait* (01.08.2012): The LBGs mixtape [video], Youtube, online-source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_KDHJ0xvV0 [accessed; 12.9.2019].

204 Davie, Lucille (09.02.2018): Joburg's market square defined the town, *The Heritage Portal*, online-source: <http://www.theheritageportal.co.za/article/joburgs-market-square-defined-town> [accessed: 12.9.2019].

many decades the plaza featured lawns, trees and fountains. In the late days of the apartheid regime, it was in a much better shape than more than 20 years later. Ayusch still remembered how Library Gardens looked during the transformation period:

Ayusch: So when we rocked up at LBGs for the first time man [in the early 1990s], it was like, yo, it was something else. You get there and this place, it's like, it's brand new. Not like how you see it now. It's brand new, there is not even a chip. And the fountains are working, like, if you lost your board, if you ollied up and you slipped out your board is in the water.

But since much of the greenery and the water fountains had been transformed into flowerbeds in the latest revamp around 2010, the atmosphere was rather bleak compared to its heyday. All in all, the square looked quite run down during the field research, like other parts of the old Johannesburg city centre. The few grass patches were unkempt and had turned brown due to not being watered. Some barren trees provided at least some shade. All sorts of garbage lay in corners of the square, especially plastic bags, packaging and plastic bottles. Here and there visitors could find empty sachets and syringes, LBGs was known as a spot where people met to drink and smoke marijuana, but also as a place where harder drugs were occasionally consumed. Because the only public toilet was in the library and therefore only accessible during its working hours, visitors to the square urinated in various corners on weekends and evenings, and occasionally the smell of old urine would tickle one's nose. As darkness fell, rats left the sewers and searched the square for food, nothing unusual in Johannesburg with its well-known large rat population.

Although LBGs remained only a shadow of its former glory, it was still a welcome place in the city centre, offering residents and workers moments of peace from the hustle and bustle of city life. The plaza was well frequented during the day, especially on weekends, by all kinds of people, among them white-collar workers, school children, residents of nearby areas, street hawkers and homeless city dwellers. Sometimes football and cricket matches were played out on the plaza. With the ANC headquarters around the corner and the public library right on the square, activists and library-goers traversed the space on weekdays constantly. From time to time the square was still used as a gathering point for demonstrations and marches. It was above all the buzz of social activity on the spacious square that made it a kind of peaceful oasis in the middle of the city centre.

For skateboarders, LBGs was first and foremost a valued skate spot due to its architectural qualities. The architects of the square probably could not have dreamed that they had designed a most attractive architectural space for skaters. Stair sets of differing dimensions, two low platforms that

could act as manual pads, ledges of different shapes and lengths, walls of different heights, there were more than enough obstacles for skaters to exercise on:

Ayusch: [The platform in front of the library building] was like the ultimate, the best manni pad you ever saw. [...] And even like till now, that's what LBGs is known for, that's what it was known for. Became the ledge, the ledge manni pad spot, that people from all over Jozi, Pretoria used to come and hit.

Interviewer: And what makes it so perfect?

Ayusch: 'Cause it had the perfect, it had the perfect length, height, mannipad, you know, and the run up was decent on both sides.

Some walls and higher curbs lined the square, and numerous staircases provided plenty of opportunities for trick performances. Neglected flowerbeds adjacent to the 'mannipads' formed ledges of a good height to invite skateboarders to perform grinds and slides on them. So on the square there was a dense collection of obstacles that were of value to skateboarders. However, the architecture of the square, much of which was made of bricks, was rough and notoriously difficult to ride. The skaters themselves had contributed to the heavy wear of the obstacles over the years, which did not exactly facilitate their use due to crumbling ledges, for example. Visiting skateboarders from elsewhere would occasionally have trouble skating the spot, as Robert, an LBGs regular, emphasised in an interview:

Interviewer: What do you like about LBGs?

Robert: I like the grind ledges, and the manni pads. I just liked that it was crusty, bra. You know, like, people from other places, Cape Town, Durban and shit, they would like, when they came to Joburg that would be like something they had to do. Like if you are a skater, you'd have to check out the library. 'Cause that's the spot. And then you'd see these dudes coming, and they always struggle to skate, to skate the spot. They complain about the bricks.

Interviewer: It's too rough [laughing].

Robert: And the grind ledges, yeah. So, ya, that's one thing I dig about it.

One of the most important features of LBGs, though, was the least spectacular one: the wide flat area in front of the library's entrance. During a session, the most activity could be witnessed there

with skateboarders continuously attempting ollies, flip tricks and slides on the ground while riding from one side of the wide space to the other. It was also an ideal space for ‘games of skate’ to be played out where skateboarders compete against one another trying to outdo each other with complicated flip tricks. A never-ending staccato of clacking tones accompanied the practising and competing skateboarders on busy days, as the floor was lined with orange-red bricks and the hard wheels of the skateboards emitted their characteristic click-noise when crossing the joints. In addition, the air was regularly filled with pop sounds resulting from ollies and boards hitting the ground upside-down after failed trick attempts. Therefore, during busy sessions the skateboarders informally occupied this space physically and acoustically. When the skaters took a break, they would sit on the stairs leading to the library entrance, watch the other skaters practice, compete or film trick attempts, have something to eat or drink, and some of the older skateboarders shared cigarettes, beers and spliffs. As Ayusch put it in a nutshell, LBGs was particularly inviting for skateboarders because it “doubled up as a chill-spot”. It was the place where the dedicated street skateboarders gathered, practised and socialised, and which therefore played an important role in rendering the scene tangible.

For some of the skaters LBGs’ attractiveness was furthered by the many amenities and points of interest in its surrounding. The square was very busy, especially on weekends, and thus offered many opportunities to watch the urban hustle and bustle and to socialise. Various shops, supermarkets, street vendors and informal traders offered cheap food, beverages and consumer goods in the vicinity. Not far from the plaza were several interesting architectural sites that were well-known skate spots. Among them were office buildings featuring marbled surfaces, a spot called ‘mirrors’ by the skateboarders (because it was next to the old stock exchange building, a diamond-shaped tower covered by dark, reflecting glass), Newtown Mall and the Dance Factory, a skatepark of a local NGO called ‘Drill Hall’ and several other smaller spots. Despite Johannesburg inner-city’s chaotic appearance, there was not, as one might assume, an almost unlimited supply of accessible spots for the skateboarders. Private security was in control of many of the well-kept buildings and adjacent spaces, and chased the skaters away. Consequently, there was a relatively small number of places the skaters knew were always skateable, a few spots that were sometimes skateable (for example on weekends), and places that were impossible to access. The urban athletes who gathered more or less spontaneously on LBGs regularly set off in small groups to these particular places of interest. As a communicative space LBGs held particular importance, because knowledge about skateable spots as well as all kinds of other news in the scene were exchanged there.

During a skate day a very vivid and lively atmosphere could develop at the skate spot. On weekends, usually between 20 and 40 skateboarders, from all over Johannesburg, were coming together for skate sessions. There was thus a considerable diversity among the skaters that was not often seen in other skateparks in Johannesburg and made LBGs a special place. The LBG skateboarders came from neighbourhoods such as the Northern and Southern Suburbs, townships like Soweto and Alexandra, and suburbs close to the city centre like Mayfair and Berea. Some skaters travelled from further afield, such as Krugersdorp and Pretoria. Brian, who had started skateboarding in the 1990s in Johannesburg, regarded LBGs as the prime example of a socially diverse skate spot in South Africa where racialised class divisions were pushed into the background:

Brian: I grew up in the Northern Suburbs with a lot of people I know. Kids grew up in Soweto, in the south-west. Kids grew up in the East Rand in the south. Downtown is none of our area. We all had to travel to go there [LBGs]. We were advantaged in, we had transportation to get there. The guys from Soweto had to use public transport. But we all travelled far to get to the place that our community was based around. And if we know we have a safe space where our community is gonna be that is where we will travel to go there.

When I conducted fieldwork in the late 2010s, a significant number of LBG regulars came from Johannesburg's inner city neighbourhoods. According to numerous older skateboarders from Johannesburg, this was a recent development, and a visible expression of the demographic change in Jozi's CBD and in skateboarding. Among the skaters from the inner city were usually the only children who joined the sessions, largely the sons of Black South Africans and immigrants who lived not far from the plaza, in neighbourhoods like Hillbrow, Berea and Yeoville. Children and young people from other parts of the city were very rarely seen, so the diversity of the visitors had limitations when it came to age groups. Moreover, there were usually no actively skateboarding girls and women taking part in the skateboarding sessions at LBGs. The group of regular skaters was composed exclusively of male youths and young men. Social diversity at the skate spot thus comprised the social categories of race, class, ethnicity and nationality, but not gender. LBGs was an impressive example of a skateboarding space where subcultural affinity and shared masculinity created a race and class diverse space for boys and (young) men. This seemed particularly remarkable because no organisation or institution coordinated the gatherings, but they were completely informal and produced by the young skateboarders, who sometimes arranged to meet, but in many cases also came to the square individually or in small groups, knowing that they would find the company of other skaters.



Illustration 18: The area in front of the main entrance of Johannesburg's public library had become an established skate spot and was well frequented by a race and class diverse crowd of skaters from different parts of the city. Particularly on weekends up to about 30 skateboarders gathered during the day, and turned the spot into a safe space and a hub to start collective 'missions' to other spots in the city.

The fact that LBGs had become a very diverse social space in certain aspects without any formal organisation had a number of manifest reasons. When it had become an established spot, it played a central role that the more or less spontaneously emerging collective of young men ensured the creation of a volatile safe space. In the city centre of Johannesburg, which was affected by a relatively high crime rate, this was essential to turn the square into a space where relaxed skateboarding was possible. If one went to the LBGs, especially on a weekend, one could count on encountering a group of skaters one could join. As I have argued in the previous chapter, the male skaters formed a volatile solidarity community whose members protected each other from the dangers in Jozi's public space. LBGs was thus a remarkable case of an informal collective of skateboarders generating a small island of safety in a class marginalised part of the city, which enticed class marginalised and class privileged skateboarders alike to join in. Furthermore, the

informal grouping at the spot allowed the undertaking of missions to nearby places of interest, as this was relatively safely possible in a group. Street veteran Ayusch was calling LBGs even a “base camp for skateboarders in Jozi” where “homies are just hooking up” to skate other spots in the city. This was indeed an important function of LBGs for the local scene. It brought the skaters from different parts of the city together in one place, enabled them to exercise and explore the city in relative safety together.

Nevertheless, visiting LBGs required some courage and the ability to deal with the sometimes threatening phenomena of inner-city life. After all, while it was safe during busy sessions due to the protection provided by the group, the commute to the spot, which might even have to be done alone, was of course fraught with risk. In addition, the number of skaters could be small, especially in the morning and late afternoon, rendering the collectively created safe space fragile. There were quite a few skateboarders in the wider context of the city, especially among class privileged suburban dwellers, who definitely did not want to spend their free time in downtown Johannesburg:

Ayusch: There is guys that just skate parks, because they have been to the city and because of the hazards and the issues, people’s cars are broken into or get stolen, the chance of you getting robbed or mugged. Things getting stolen. And just people giving you shit, wrong mentalities. Like it’s a lot to deal with, ya, honestly, there is a lot to deal with. So a lot of guys I think, because they work 9 to 5, or they work hard in their jobs, when it comes to skating they just want to go somewhere where they are undisturbed, you know.

LBGs therefore provided relative safety in the context of the inner-city of Johannesburg, but, as it was a public urban space and one had to travel to LBGs through the inner city first, certain risks could never be fully excluded and had to be dealt with.²⁰⁵ Therefore, the typical visitors of the skate spot were mainly streetwise, self-confident boys and (young) men who already knew the inner-city life or who were not afraid to approach it. The fact that the skateboarding boys and men came from so many different parts of the city had something to do with the geographical location of the square. An important prerequisite for this role of LBGs in Johannesburg was its good accessibility. Due to its centrality LBGs had become an ideal meeting place for skateboarders residing in different parts of Johannesburg since the (early) 1990s, as Yusuf explained to me:

205 Tellingly, during my field research with the skaters at the LBGs, I never got into a sticky situation. However, when I once went for a walk from LBGs to Constitution Hill with a PhD student from Wits University, we were almost mugged a few blocks away and only escaped untouched by luck. This made me realise that the area around the square was indeed quite risky and that the protection of a larger group was a big advantage in this context.

Yusuf: Yeah, myself and Ayusch we were the, myself and Ayusch and the Yeoville crew basically, he used to live in Mayfair and we used to live in Yeoville, so we used to skate to town, to town and he used to skate to town and we used to meet at the Library Gardens. [...]

Interviewer: Ok, and LBGs was basically your meeting point because it was like in the middle and

Yusuf: It was always the middle.

Interviewer: And it was easy to mission from there?

Yusuf: It was the city spine, it was the centre of town where it wasn't a bust, because the street, there weren't security guards for LBGs. It was just an open area, you know, open space in the city that didn't get watched. [...]

Ayusch: [...] the reason we come there is 'cause it's the most accessible place. It's like a spot we can hit, because, obviously I can't drive all over the show. I am not gonna fucking leg it to Randburg, or leg it to Edenvale. And then, travel again and shit, the city is the most accessible because it is one taxi in and one taxi out, or I can skate from here to the city and skate back home, so. That's been one of the reasons why I even skate the city most of the time, because, like I told you, I have always lived in the outskirts of the city, so it's like kinda my route, and it's accessible for me.

From most areas mini taxis drove to the inner city and for skaters relying on public transport it was convenient that it took one taxi to get in the inner city, close to LBGs, and one taxi back home. Moreover, the city run train and Reya Vaya bus network provided further options for a relatively convenient trip to LBGs from some areas. Skateboarders who lived not far from or in the old CBD could just skate to the plaza on their boards. Not least, Library Gardens was accessible by car and motorbike, as vehicles could be parked on the sides of the plaza or in nearby parking lots. The variety of options to get to LBGs was cited by many skaters as an important reason for the diverse scene that usually gathered there:

Yusuf: You know, like in Johannesburg we used to skate the city and there were guys from other neighbourhoods that would come to the city as well. But we would skate from where we lived [Yeoville and Fordsburg] to the city and they would come either with their parents' cars or you know like that, the, the richer kids. And those were guys we ended up skating with.

The fact that a reasonably large and diverse group of urban athletes was able to form regularly, especially at weekends, was therefore not solely grounded in the material and 'soft' qualities of the

space, but due to the central location and very good accessibility of the square for skaters from a rather wide variety of social backgrounds, as skate veteran Sam Khumalo emphasised in a documentary about the local scene:

"Everybody comes and meets here [at LBGs], this is like the central spot for everybody in Joburg. So no matter from which side you come from, this is where you wanna be coming through skating the city. You are gonna meet up with everybody. And yeah, there is nothing better than having a mission with everybody."²⁰⁶

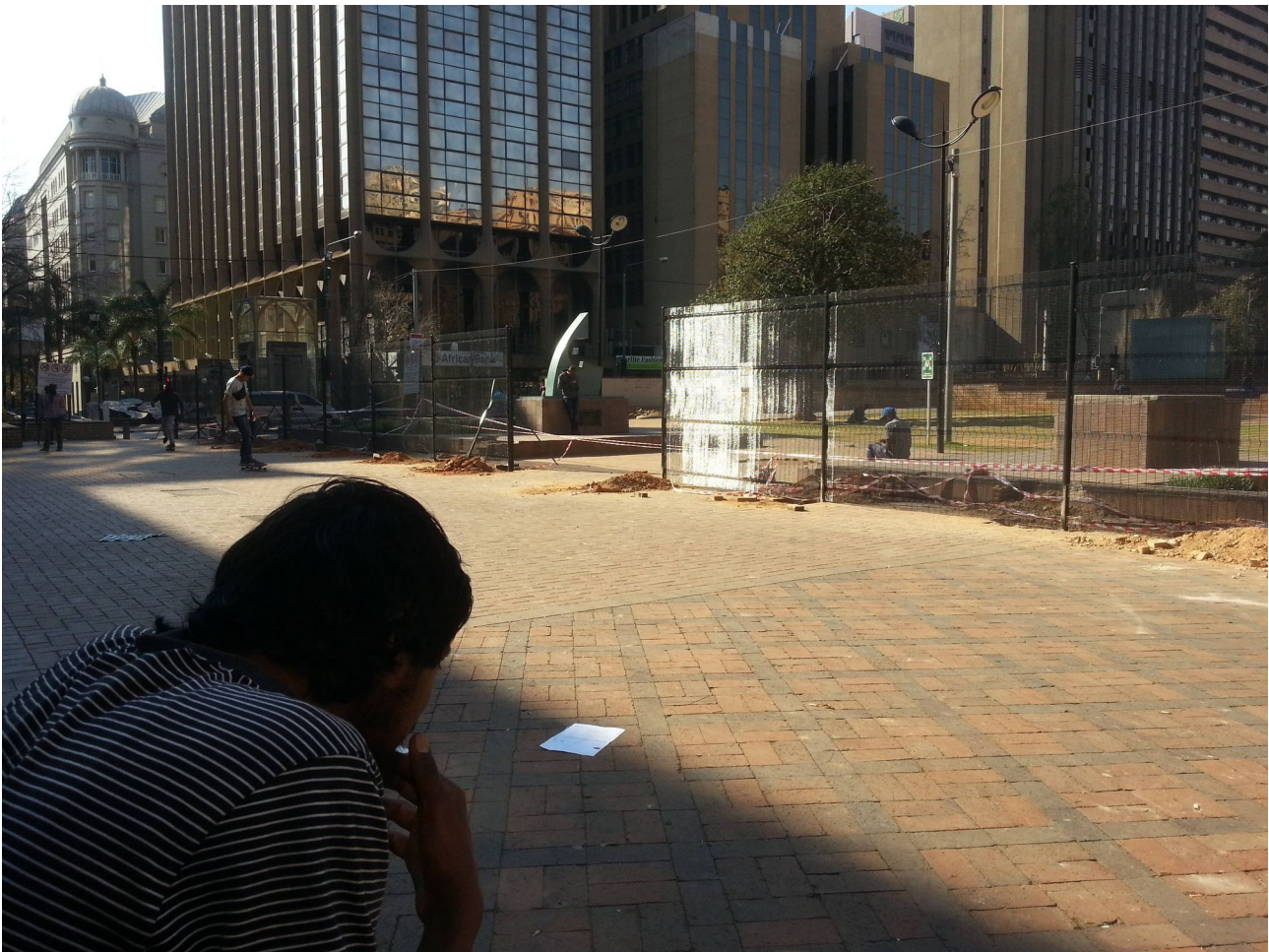


Illustration 19: In 2018, the city had fenced off the spot, presumably to keep homeless people and skateboarders away from the main entrance of the National Library. For Johannesburg street skateboarders this meant the loss of an important spot and meeting place that could hardly be compensated for. Here, I visited the skate spot with a group of street skaters for one last session. At that time, the fence was still under construction and the spot was still partially accessible.

206 Red Bull Skateboarding (30.01.2023): The Soul Skaters Of South Africa | GREETINGS FROM JOHANNESBURG [video], Youtube, online-source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Askm3TOwq8> [accessed: 03.04.2023].

In the residentially segregated society, LBGs could thus nevertheless turn into a socially diverse space and iconic spot that was known nationwide and that formed an important resource in the city for the local street scene. Unfortunately, the city or the management of the library seemed to have little sympathy for the skaters and ‘killed’ the spot through an architectural intervention shortly after I ended my field research in 2017.²⁰⁷ The part of the square in front of the National Library, the core of the skate spot, was completely fenced in and thus made practically unskateable.²⁰⁸ The bitter setback this represented for the local scene was alleviated only by two newly built skateparks not far from the city centre.²⁰⁹ That the skateboarders coming together at LBGs were a highly diverse crowd in terms of race, class, ethnicity and nationality did not mean that respective social inequalities and divisions were irrelevant to the skateboarders. It was primarily class inequalities that were overlapping with racialised positions that could be at the root of visible divisions among skaters and led to an occasional flaring up of conflicts. The tensions arising from enormous inequalities coexisted with the feeling of being part of a skateboarding scene that overcame social differences and offered a sense of solidarity. Simba, who was spending much time at LBGs as a young adult skating, emphasised how for him the skateboarders meeting at the plaza were friends, but that racialised class inequalities would still play a role in creating divisions among the skaters that could be mediated but never truly overcome:

Interviewer: So is there, would you also like say that is the situation at LBGs that everyone comes together and it’s like a united kinda skating scene?

Simba: Ya. And we fight for each other no matter what.

Interviewer: Ya.

Simba: But of course, we also have these divisions between certain groups, but we are all still together.

Interviewer: I see, ya, ya. And like regarding divisions, like what would you say, like, what are divisions that you see in the skating scene in Joburg?

207 As I mentioned in the previous chapter, some of the street skateboarders were not entirely innocent regarding the intervention, as they had repeatedly attracted negative attention through vandalism, littering and disrespectful behaviour. This was a small minority among the skaters, but the consequences had to be borne by all skaters with the closure of the spot.

208 Red Bull Skateboarding (30.01.2023): The Soul Skaters Of South Africa | GREETINGS FROM JOHANNESBURG [video], Youtube, online-source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Askrm3TOWq8> [accessed: 03.04.2023].

209 In fact, the local scene showed great resilience in the years following the closure, suffering less of a setback than some skaters expected. In particular, two new public skateparks, close to the city center, developed into new hubs of the Johannesburg scene in the following years.

Simba: Ok. Divisions like, it's actually, it's not about race anymore, like I see jealousy.

Interviewer: What role does jealousy play?

Simba: 'Cause you can see guys from like Alex[andra] when they look at the Edenvale guys they are like 'Oh, they have everything, they have money, they have boards'. Now they think they are the shit when it's not even like that. If they grow up together and talk to each other, it's done. That's all they have to do, make peace. But they decided to say 'Oh, cheese boy'. Even Ndumiso [an older, highly recognised Black street skateboarder] told me like, you should know how to switch lanes, but know your lane. We can be friends, but obviously there will always be that division between us.

Simba's statement seemed to capture well the 'vibe' of LBGs skaters, who on the one hand identified themselves as a large, diverse collective, but within which social distinctions and divisions still played an important role that occasionally surfaced. Of course, there were many interactions in social diversity, in fact, what struck me as remarkable was that at a spot like LBG's, racialised class hierarchies were levelled insofar as there bitterly poor, racially discriminated skaters and wealthy, racially privileged skaters entered an equal interaction framed by skateboarding completely voluntarily. Without ever having to be directly articulated, the LBG skaters made their interest in lived diversity clear qua presence. Yet, it was a regular sight to witness skaters mingling while practising, but dividing into racialised groups sitting off to the side during breaks. In addition, differences in the skaters' behaviour became visible. For example, a crew of White middle class skaters from the north caused recurringly displeasure among some skaters of colour from the inner city during my fieldwork stay, as the former occasionally (and unintentionally) flaunted their wealth when arriving in expensive cars and motorcycles²¹⁰, and were lavishly consuming food and drinks without sharing them with other skaters. In contrast, many of the inner-city skaters who came from poor backgrounds rode to the plaza through the often dense and chaotic traffic on their battered boards, and shared the few cheap snacks and drinks they could afford, or simply did not eat or drink at all during the sessions to avoid jealousy and tensions. And while skaters of colour from the inner city especially appreciated LBGs because it was one of the few comparatively peaceful places they could easily access, some of the wealthier skaters from outside seemed to regard the plaza as just another 'fucked up place' in Johannesburg where they could misbehave, temptingly in the semi-

210 A low point in this behaviour was that a White skateboarder from the northern suburbs would always pull up on a high-powered motorcycle and occasionally put on a show by performing burnouts on the square. Not only did he shame especially the poor skaters from the inner city by his behavior in public. He also engaged in an activity that he could only pursue because of his class privileges and that corresponded to a senseless destruction of resources. In addition, his reckless behaviour put skateboarders in a bad light in the public eye.

regulated inner city, without fear of consequences.²¹¹ Here, it was precisely the high mobility that tempted rather class privileged skaters to challenge or violate norms in public life, as they could easily change locations in case of trouble. Class marginalised skaters tended, in my impression, to be much more careful and cautious, as they mostly had only a limited number of accessible opportunities for skateboarding. That wealthy skaters could afford to be generally more destructive was highlighted for me when, in the course of a session, one skater, a White young man, attracted attention when he drunkenly performed wheelies and burnouts on a motorbike on the plaza, probably burning more capital in the truest sense of the word in a couple minutes than class marginalised skaters have available to them in an entire week. It was such sometimes lapidary differences in the way different skaters used and perceived the inner city that made it clear that those participating were used to quite different lifeworlds, available resources and opportunities. At the end of the day, the urban athletes came together to skate together, and the at-times extreme inequalities between those present receded into the background when practical skateboarding was the centre of attention. This was emphasised by Ayusch, who had been riding at LBGs for many years and, as he made a living from selling skate equipment at the spot and maintained good contacts with a large number of skaters from different social backgrounds, seemed to be familiar with the respective challenges and privileges the different skaters faced. When the skaters met for a session, there was an unspoken understanding that the extreme social inequalities would be pushed into the background:

Ayusch: Like it's not just your life on the board, it's your life off the board, as well. You know, it's like, it's like what you are going home to when you are done skating. Everybody is not going home to the same thing. So that's what makes it difficult. Because when you come out, like I said, when you come out to town, when you come out like to LBGs on a Saturday. It's like, it's a level playing ground, it doesn't matter where you came from, you are there to skate. So nobody will be worried about like, where you came from, like, and what you are riding, where you came from, whether you could afford your board. Not saying, nobody really gives a shit, but that's something you must take care off, you gotta sort that shit out on your own. If you have people that are sponsored and they can hook you up, to sort out your equipment, ultimately that is your thing. And if you hit the spot it's a level playing ground. Nobody is worried about what you ate, where you have eaten, whether you have eaten, whether you have money or not, that's your business. So like, like in that way it does make it odd.

211 In fact, it seemed that some of the visiting class privileged skaters, the majority being White South Africans residing in the suburbs north and south of the city, were particularly responsible for the fencing-off of the spot through their disrespectful behaviour. The consequences were primarily felt by class marginalised skaters residing in the inner-city for whom LBGs was the most important skate spot and meeting point. The class privileged skaters from the suburbs could simply shift their focus to other and move on, they could afford to escape the consequences of their behaviour.

The 'rules of irrelevance' described by Goffman (1972: 20) seemed to be almost ideally observable in the context of skateboarding at LBGs. Their working contributed significantly to the fact that despite extreme inequalities among those present, it was possible to skate together, and practice and experience skateboarding as a socially diverse sport and subculture. Yet, as Ayusch pointed out at the end, 'overlooking' the sometimes extreme inequalities and pretending to share a level playing field in the skate sessions could also have a stale aftertaste. For if the wealthy who lived in abundance blanked out the situation of the poor, some of whom lived in existential poverty, this could indicate both a form of acceptance or a lack of empathy. And for skaters from poor households, it was sometimes hard to bear watching some affluent kids from the suburbs flaunting their wealth, which the latter were often not even aware of out of habit. Such dynamics permeated many sectors of the South African society and resulting tensions were not always easy to endure or solve. But coming together under 'the rules irrelevance', at least when it came to playing a game together, had some potential to open up further opportunities for exchange and mutual learning. So social diversity at LBGs was not without conflict, but framed by playful skateboarding it became manageable and ties could be forged across racialised class divisions. Under practical circumstances, it also simply made pragmatic sense for skateboarders to overlook any inequalities and lifestyle differences: Otherwise, no larger group of skaters would have come together in the first place which would have been to the detriment of all skaters. Only by bringing together skaters of different positions in terms of race and class did LBGs regularly develop a large, spontaneous collective that was to the benefit of all present. At the end of the day, the emerging social diversity, even if not always easy to manage, was a valued aspect of the nationally known skate spot.

As I have described earlier, skateparks and skate spots located in Cape Town's poor neighbourhoods, particularly in the Cape Flats, were notable for their often low diversity. But socially diverse skate spaces could also be found in Cape Town, which were also formed here in the inner city, but under different circumstances. Two inner-city skateparks were known to be important meeting spaces for the local skateboarding scene and gather a diverse crowd of skateboarders from throughout the city. These were a publicly accessible private skatepark in Green Point, which was also known under the name 'Salesians' due to its location in the backyard of a Christian NGO with the name (although the park itself was run by volunteers of a German NGO), and a public skatepark under a bridge in Gardens, known as 'Mill Street skatepark' or simply 'Gardens'. Both places were in relative proximity to each other, a 15-minute skateboard ride apart. These skateparks were undoubtedly the most important hubs in Cape Town where skateboarders from all parts of the city met and exercised when I conducted fieldwork in 2016 and 2017. Even during the week, at least on

afternoons, one could count on both skateparks being well attended. Especially on the weekends a diverse crowd tended to gather. Skaters from neighbourhoods like Hanover Park, Elsie's Rivier, Mitchell's Plain and Bo-Kaap could meet skaters from Fish Hoek, Sea Point, Gardens, Observatory and Hout Bay, and potentially form new social connections. They were also places where amateurs would bump into some of the top professional skaters of the country. The importance of these parks was made particularly clear by the fact that they often appeared in the local mediated skateboarding discourse.²¹² They were facilities where skaters could 'show off' to each other: those who skateboarded well at Mill Street and Salesians gained attention in the local skate scene. In a sense, both places had become not only important, diverse meeting places, but also 'arenas' in which to showcase one's skills to the wider skate scene. This was so much the case at Gardens in particular that the park was known to be a rather intimidating environment for beginners. Because as much as one could prove oneself as an athlete in front of other skaters, one could also embarrass oneself in front of them. So a strong element of (indirect) competition played a role in this park. The relative confinement of the park, it was quite small, and the often high number of visiting skaters seemed to promote a competitive culture. Former professional Yusuf, for example, felt comfortable in the park due to his advanced skate skills, but he was aware of the fact that beginners did often not feel this way during peak hours:

Yusuf: Mill Street skatepark, that is the very trendy place to be. Like only the good guys go there, or should I say, the not so good guys don't really skate there in peak hours because it is a small space. [...] You get beginners going to Salesians more because there is more space, there is more beginner things. You increase your skill level there whereas when you go to Mill Street you have to put down. The guys are watching, for one. And also the obstacles, they don't lean towards learning tricks. You'll have to know your tricks by the time you get there.

In any case, Gardens and Salesians had become well-visited, valued and highly diverse skate spots in the city. It was not only the architectural quality, the good location of the parks and the perceived safety, but also the social diversity and the liveliness of both spaces that made them attractive destinations for boys and (young) men. If one wanted to skate in company and was eager to meet skateboarders from throughout the city, these two locations were prime addresses in Cape Town. Both places were, in a way, very positive examples of integrated leisure spaces, leaving aside the fact that both places were extremely male dominated. So it was no surprise that the 'A-Park-Tyde'

²¹² This was underlined by the fact that skaters from overseas who spent time in Cape Town as tourists, students or workers would appear frequently during my fieldwork there as they had learned about the skateparks before coming to the city.

event mentioned earlier, with skaters creating an affordable alternative to an exclusive commercial event, was held at Gardens. The park had become a hub of Cape Town's street skateboarding scene. There seemed to be a few factors why Gardens and Salesians had started to play this role. Again here, good accessibility was a key factor. Although both parks were located on the privileged side of the city, they were relatively easy to access by car, minibus taxi, taxi and train. Because the transportation infrastructure perpetuated from apartheid allowed relatively easy travel from impoverished parts of Cape Town to its privileged side (cf. Pirie 1992: 173f.), also skateboarders from many Cape Flats neighbourhoods had a couple of relatively comfortable opportunities to travel to the parks during the day. Skateboarders from privileged suburbs and downtown mostly had vehicles anyway, and could park in the vicinity to the facilities. If the distance was not too far, skaters also used their boards or, more rarely, bicycles to get to them. This was the case for some athletes who live in the CBD or in neighbourhoods close to it, such as Woodstock, Observatory, Salt River or Bo-Kaap. Moreover, from Gardens, it was possible to reach numerous skate spots in the city centre or cruise to the beach promenade in Sea Point (at the slight risk of being stopped by the police or being mugged). It was an ideal meeting place to head out and explore the city.

Accessing both skateparks was also free of charge, turning them into a viable option for skateboarders of all class positions. Consequently, athletes only had to pay transportation costs to use these venues. In shops and supermarkets in the area, food and drinks could be found to get through a skate day. Finally, it was particularly significant that, at least during the day, the inner-city was generally relatively safe regarding (violent) crime due to the presence of security and police forces, and the vivid public life. Since the two skateparks were almost always frequented by skaters, they were particularly safe spaces in the South African context, and allowed relaxed skateboarding and hanging-out. Especially on weekends, the parks could get crowded as skaters travelled from all parts of the city, especially also from the more remote parts of the Cape Flats. Accordingly, 'the local scene' came together regularly in these parks, and due to the lively tourism, foreign skaters recurrently showed up. The inner-city skate venues in Cape Town thus had quite a few parallels to LBGs in Johannesburg, especially in terms of architectural qualities attractive to skaters, central location and good accessibility, vivid urban life and amenities in the surrounding, free use and relative safety from crime. One important difference was that the Cape Town facilities were formally designated for skateboarding, which brought some advantages but also forms of regulation for the skaters. Skateboarding at the LBGs in Johannesburg was practically completely informally organised and therefore among skaters in South Africa often regarded as an 'authentic' skate spot, yet conflicts of use with other users of the plaza led to the closure of the spot in the end.

Because of the qualities mentioned, Gardens and Salesians were able to establish themselves as citywide meeting spots of Cape Town's skateboarding scene. The potential of skateboarding to bring together children, teenagers and young adults from diverse social backgrounds became truly visible there. Both parks also showed that certain conditions had to be met to realise this potential. Relying on social skills of skaters and the construction of skateparks alone did not guarantee that race and class diverse spaces would come into existence. Cases like the previously mentioned skate parks in Valhalla Park and Athlone underlined this. However, under certain conditions, skateboarding could undoubtedly contribute to producing diverse spaces in terms of race and class.



Illustration 20: 'Gardens' was a well frequented skatepark close to Cape Town's city centre. In afternoons and on weekends, there were always other skaters to be found here. Due to its location under a busy bridge, very compact design and its instrumentalisation by the City of Cape Town for the displacement of homeless people who had camped under the bridge, the skatepark also drew criticism in the local skate scene.

5.2.5 Displacement through skateboarding: the case of the Gardens skatepark

However, on another level, the case of the Gardens skatepark made it clear that the issue of producing socially integrated spaces involved further layers of complexity in a highly contested environment like Cape Town and that skateboarding could be instrumentalised as a controversial means of urban politics when used as an element in urban planning and design. The Gardens skatepark did not come into being as an informally organised space, as did LBGs in Johannesburg, but was the result of an urban planning project that followed central paradigms of the city government's development policy. Initially, Gardens was a highly welcomed addition to Cape Town's skate infrastructure, as it was the first public skatepark in the city centre when opened in 2014.²¹³ This was surprisingly late regarding the fact that public skateparks had been built in other suburbs and particularly in the Cape Flats many years before, where households could often barely afford the necessary equipment to engage in skateboarding and where the sport led a niche existence. As I argued earlier in the thesis, one finding of my research was that socially integrated spaces could first and foremost develop in easily accessible spaces in privileged areas in the Capetonian context. From this it could be deduced that a city government aiming for social integration through sport and leisure activities would also build facilities in appropriate locations to promote socially diverse interaction among its population. However, this was not necessarily the case in Cape Town, or only recently during the time I conducted research. Of the 18 public skateparks that existed in Cape Town in 2016/2017, only one facility was found in the inner-city. Most of the public parks could be found in suburbs on the fringes and in the Cape Flats (Morgan 2013). Many of the latter were underused and in poor condition, others, such as the skatepark in Valhalla Park, were of outstanding quality but hardly used by the bitterly poor residents, and rarely used by skaters from other parts of the city due to excessive crime rates. Why the City of Cape Town had decided to build a large number of skateparks in peripheral, poor and sometimes heavily crime-ridden areas, where few residents could afford skateboarding, remained an unsolved mystery for me until the end of my research. As depicted earlier, this question was occasionally discussed among local skateboarders, with some scene members and professionals regarding the construction of skateparks in poor neighbourhoods as a waste of resources. Others, like Frankie, saw a risk of infrastructurally cementing skateboarding as an activity of White, affluent South Africans coming with the criticism of skatepark construction in marginalised neighbourhoods:

213 Cape Town Magazine (n.d.): Shred it Under the Mill Street at the Gardens Skatepark: This new boarding playground transform a redundant CBD zone into a recreational hub, CapeTownMagazine.com, online-source: <https://www.capetownmagazine.com/gardens-skatepark> [accessed: 25.6.2016].

Frankie: When we did post stuff, like, you could look at all the comments and the comments for like, yeah, ‘the government will just put skateparks in kak areas, right. And government will, why they are putting skateparks in kak areas, why are they putting skateparks in areas where there are no skaters? So why putting skateparks in Khayelitsha or why putting skateparks in Delft, because there are no skateboarders’. Because skateboarders are generally, so it kinda perpetuates in society that skateboarding belongs to a white affluent community.

Interviewer: True, ya

Frankie: So ‘put the facilities where we are’, that’s what it says. It is weird, and all the comments, it was on skate collective stuff, I went to see who those people are, to see like what they are. And I could see like what they posted, and whatever. But there were also a lot of Coloured skaters in that group that were from Elsies Rivier, going, why we are putting skateparks in Elsies River, we should put skateparks where skateboarders are, in affluent areas. So I couldn’t understand what their thinking was.

With the construction of the first skatepark in the inner-city of Cape Town another controversial topic was put on the table: the city government’s tendency to displace poor residents from privileged and gentrifying areas through skateboarding facilities (cf. Samara 2011: 4). The Gardens skatepark had been built under a bridged motorway junction not far from the CBD of the city. Constructing skateparks under bridges had become quite popular in certain western cities as a supposedly creative way to use the often vacant space. Well-known examples in this regard, to name a few, were the Burnside skatepark in Portland (USA), the Under the Bridge skatepark in San Francisco (USA), a skatepark at Heidelberger Platz in Berlin (Germany) and the Underpass Park in Toronto (Canada) (cf. Vivoni 2009: 136ff.). The Gardens skatepark was designed by the corporate sponsored Building Trust International, opened to the public in early 2014, and celebrated in the media:

“The winning design, Cape Town Mill St Skatepark, transforms an under-utilized and blighted underpass into a community-led skatepark and vibrant public space. [...] ‘The aim was to make an unsafe space safer, to give it a positive use instead of a negative one,’ explains Alderman Belinda Walker, Mayoral Committee Member in Cape Town”²¹⁴.

214 Sian (05.09.2014): World Design Capital opens skate park, <https://www.worldarchitecturenews.com/article/1514751/world-design-capital-opens-skate-park> [accessed: 4.2.2020].

In an interview with Huckmag, an architect explained that the park was intended to create usage of an underused space, deter “unwanted elements and prevent anti-social behaviour”²¹⁵ and improve the general safety in the area. If one trusted the narrative of the City of Cape Town and private enterprises connected to the project, the skatepark under the bridge in Mill Street was a masterstroke to turn an underused, unsafe area into a pleasant, socially frequented public space. As described above, this point was true to a degree as the Gardens skatepark was a real success in terms of producing a lively and diverse social space for (largely male) skateboarders. But things were more complicated than that. That the publicly circulating success story was quite one-sided became obvious to me during my first visit to the park in 2016.

The park suffered from profound design problems, which were confirmed to me by numerous skateboarders and a professional skatepark architect. Situated under a motorway bridge and in the middle of a junction, the park was generally dark, dusty and visitors had to endure noise and exhaust emissions. This was not a place to go to relax in peace. Only those who focused on active skateboarding came here. There was no dedicated seating area, nearly all the space was occupied by obstacles. Skaters used some of the obstacles to sit on during breaks, but the lack of seating meant that non-skateboarders or spectators were rarely present²¹⁶, and the space was generally only partly useable to relax and socialise outside active skateboarding. The park itself was quite small and the obstacles were compactly arranged so that even a small number of skateboarders quickly got in each others way when riding the park, which on the one hand could stimulate mutual consideration and communication, but on the other hand could nurture a hard, competitive riding culture I mentioned earlier. As I learned over the months of my research stay, many skateboarders also didn’t like the selection and arrangement of the obstacles (although they still used the park), and some had quite concrete ideas about improvements to the park’s design, like Samuel:

Samuel: Mill Street, ya, it’s a piece of shit. It’s a big piece of kak, whatever. Because it’s in town now, so everyone is like wow, but it’s kak. Civic [Centre] was like the meeting spot before Mill Street got built. That’s like a legendary spot. [...] [Mill Street is] chilly, it’s very crappy. They could have done so much better shit with that. They could have built a proper plaza in that space. A proper, proper plaza that everyone could have enjoyed, everyone. But no, they had to get kak.

215 Huck HQ (08.02.2014): Cape Town Gardens skatepark, Huck Magazine, online-source:

<https://www.huckmag.com/outdoor/skate/cape-town-gardens-skate-park/> [accessed: 4.2.2020].

216 It was hardly possible to sit at the park, watch and talk with others on the side, as it was possible in other skateparks. In this park one quickly felt as a disturbance factor if one could not keep up with the high paced skateboarding of the skilled amateurs and professionals often found at the park.

Contrary to the city's official narrative, Mill Street was, in this sense, not a skatepark developed together with the skateboarding community, because neither skateboarders, nor other users of the space had been involved in choosing the site, deciding on its use and designing the park. Like the majority of skateparks in Cape Town, it had been planned and designed behind the closed doors of professionals' offices, but certainly not by including its future users in the design process.²¹⁷ Furthermore, beneath the surface of the official narrative there was another layer of the skatepark's story that conflicted with its supposed function to promote a socially diverse environment in the inner-city. In this version of the story the park was employed in concert with the neoliberal development paradigms of the city government that caused the systemic displacement of the poor from inner-city areas to the Cape Flats, the majority of the displaced being South Africans and foreigners of colour. The development of the park fitted smoothly into the dynamic that has been termed by some authors on Cape Town's development after 1994 as 'neo-apartheid' (Anciano/Piper 2019; Bond 2004: 47; cf. Fleming 2011: 10; Miraftab 2004: 889f.; Visser/Kotze 2008: 2572). Although it was claimed in the public presentation of the skate park project that the space under the bridge had been unused, homeless people had slept and camped there until the skate park had been built. The 'unwanted elements' and 'anti-social behaviour' city representatives mentioned, referred to the impoverished and 'homeless' individuals using the space under the bridge. To what extent the displacement of the homeless was a main goal of the project, as some skaters rumoured, I could not find out. What was certain was that the city welcomed the displacement of the homeless, who were generally considered a problem and a security risk in the city. For Frankie, who was an experienced skateboarder and a city planner who had worked for the City of Cape Town for some time, the Mill Street skatepark was not even built for the skateboarders in the first place, but its construction was used as a pretence to displace the vagrants who used to camp under the bridge.

Frankie: Mill Street for instance is not a park designed for skateboarders, it was a skatepark designed to get rid of the homeless people.

²¹⁷ It was furthermore built by a company that, for reasons that remained hidden to me, was said to acquire nearly all public tenders for skatepark constructions and be responsible for the majority of skatepark builds in the Cape Flats. As most skateparks in the Cape Flats suffered from severe design and construction related problems, some of them were actually unskateable, this company had a very bad reputation in the local skateboarding scene. Many skateboarders and particularly critical voices from within the skateboard industry alleged the company of corruption and saw as a central reason for the bad quality of the parks that, not uncommon for government financed construction projects in South Africa, the company's owners shovelled the budget into their own pockets instead of into the design and construction process itself. For these reasons, it was hardly surprising for informants that the Mill Street park was of questionable quality and suffered from serious flaws. These allegations were spectacularly confirmed when the company was involved in the construction of a skatepark in Woodstock that had to be torn down after skateboarders criticized the severe quality issues of the first construction attempt and was rebuilt afterwards.

Interviewer: I have heard that story, ya. It's kinda unbelievable.

Frankie: It's the truth man. [...] Skaters didn't identify that space, they didn't demand a skatepark under the bridge, it was more a project by city parks [City of Cape Town Recreation and Parks Department], 'we have a problem with vagrants in the CBD. What can we do to get rid of the vagrants?'

Interviewer: And that is like a way to get rid of them that doesn't look like too brutal, in a way.

Frankie: Exactly. It became a space for the young kids and whatever. And, there, so a lot of the guys spoke up to me, the guys from 20sk8 spoke up to us, you know. And it was, there also being the vagrants that staying there, they just moving and the vagrants stay along the skatepark, which is scary, you now. [...] And the reason why it was celebrated was not because it was a skatepark. None of the World Design Capital [urban design award] people looked at the design of the skatepark, nobody appreciated the design of the skatepark, it was not about the design. It was about how they used a skatepark under a bridge.

Following Frankie's remarks, displacing the poor occupying the space under the bridge might have been a central intention of the skatepark's construction. The park itself materially occupied the formerly 'vacant' space, and therefore displaced previous and alternative uses. During the day, when the park was open, skateboarders would contribute to dispel the poor by claiming the space that was formally designated for them by the city. During the night, the gate allowing entrance to the fenced park was locked²¹⁸, sealing the space from public use completely and making it impossible for the homeless to sleep there. The Mill Street park was a striking example for increasingly popular attempts to "'sanitize' urban public spaces by displacing prostitution, homelessness, and drug use" (Vivoni 2009: 137) through skateboard infrastructure. This aspect became highly graspable when I coincidentally met a former user of the space in 2018:

I was standing at the entrance of Mill Street Park, watching acclaimed professional skateboarder Khule Ngubane practising slides and grinds on a rail. I did not feel like skating myself today, particularly not at the Mill Street Park which did offer few obstacles catering my limited skate skills. A Coloured man, probably in his 40s, wearing worn, dirty clothes and carrying a black garbage bag approached me: "Hey brother, hey brother!". I expected him to ask me for cash and ignored him first (realising how I had internalised the stereotyping of the poor in the country myself afterwards). "Hey brother", he just wanted to chat. He told me that he used to stay here for a while, he pointed towards a corner of the park, "this was my sleeping spot". Since he lost his sleeping place close to the city centre with the construction of the skatepark, making a

218 During my research stay, the locked gated was at least once broken open and the park had been used as a sleeping spot during that time.

living has become much more difficult for him, he emphasised. “This is a nice place, eh?!” he added in a way that I couldn’t tell if he was serious or cynical, “you like watching the skating?”. “I am not sure if this is a nice place when I hear your story”, I answered. He nodded and recounted how he had been forced to move to Manenberg after losing his home under the bridge. Obviously he was still coming to “this side of the mountain” regularly “to scratch the bins”, because there was of course more to be found in the trash cans of the affluent inner city than in neighbourhoods of the Cape Flats. Yet, he now had to first travel an arduous distance to the city centre in order to pursue his activity there. And of course, he explained to me, displacement to the Cape Flats, especially for a marginalised person like him, was fraught with all sorts of other difficulties and dangers from which the relatively regulated inner city offered some protection. While a relatively small group of skaters were given a thoroughly nice skatepark here, where they could enjoy themselves in their free time, other people had lost what they called their home and their work in this very place. After a few more friendly words exchanged the man said goodbye and continued his walk towards the city centre. (Fieldwork diary, 16.09.2018)

Many skateboarders were aware of the fact that the skatepark, and therefore to a degree the skateboarders using it, had been used as a tool to displace the poor. In the short film ‘Jas Boude’ starring the skate crew 20sk8, the controversial background of the Gardens skatepark is brought up clearly:

“These aren't our streets. This isn't our park. We asked for a park the last 15 years and the government act like they built this park for us. But they just needed to get rid of all the homeless people who used to call this bridge home.”²¹⁹

Some skateboarders told me feeling partly guilty when skating the park, and some skaters refused to skate the park at all. Others had stayed away from Mill Street for a while, but had been ‘seduced’ by the park’s opportunities in the end. Mill Street illustrated that skateboarding and skateboard infrastructure were not inherently socially integrative. Skateboarding and skateboard infrastructure could also be used to promote a certain use of space to displace certain practices and social groups. In this respect, the promotion of skateboarding could be employed within the framework of neoliberal urban development (Howell 2005: 33; Howell 2008: 480). A similar case was observed by Francisco Vivoni (2009: 137) in the context of the American Burnside Bridge in Portland (USA) where a skatepark had been used to displace homeless people, drug traders and sex workers.

219 Jas Boude the Film (01.03.2016): Jas Boude [video], Youtube, online-source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vTCMfNqeTI> [accessed: 10.7.2020].

Despite the questionable background and design of the Mill Street skatepark had acquired the status of an authentic (meeting) spot for street skateboarders from the affluent and poor areas, and therefore tended to be more integrated regarding the race and class positions of visitors than parks elsewhere in Cape Town. From the point of view of some local skateboarders who had been observing local developments for a long time, however, it was precisely this effect that was one reason why the park had been built so late by the city. As mentioned before, when opened to the public in 2014, Gardens was the first public skatepark in the inner-city, after 18 skateparks had been built in other parts of the city, outside the CBD, the years before. Some of the older skateboarders I met on a recurring basis assumed that this was no coincidence but the effect of a deliberate strategy of the city government. In a conversation, Yusuf explained his theory that the city delayed building a public skatepark downtown for so long because it aimed to prevent skateboarders from poor neighbourhoods being drawn to the city centre:

Yusuf: Before [the city took a more liberal stance towards skateboarding] we were always petitioning for skateparks in Sea Point and they never did anything, and they never ever, and they still let the same old ‘it’s gonna happen, it’s gonna happen’, but nothing ever happens, because the people in Sea Point don’t want a skatepark, because they think it brings bad elements.

Interviewer: I see.

Yusuf: So the council of Sea Point is always against that. So what they did was the Cape Town, Cape Town council started approving skateparks in the bad neighbourhoods to keep the bad kids out of, coming to town

Interviewer: I see, really?

Yusuf: So instead of building a skatepark in town, Mill Street was the last skatepark we built, they build skateparks everywhere else first, so that that wouldn’t happen, ‘cause they knew if they build a free skatepark, a public skatepark in Sea Point it’s gonna bring everybody there.

Interviewer: Ok.

Yusuf: So they first did all the other areas.

From Yusuf's account, it can be seen that in public discourse skateboarding and skateparks were regarded as socially diverse spaces. The promotion of skateboarding spaces was therefore apparently also associated in (parts of) the City of Cape Town with the promotion of socially

diverse spaces, which implied that marginalised boys and men would be among the users of corresponding infrastructure. However, the City of Cape Town pursued a spectrum of anti-poor policies with which the presence of class marginalised people in the class privileged inner city was progressively reduced through, for example, gentrification and the criminalisation of begging and homelessness (Bond 2004: 47; Gukelberger 2018: 14f.; Lemanski 2004: 103; Samara 2011: 2; Visser 2008: 2585ff.). In a racialised class society like South Africa, these anti-poor policies largely coincided with measures that negatively affected people of colour, who were massively overrepresented among the poor. The city government did therefore regard race and class diverse spaces as a potential security threat and regulated them accordingly. The construction of skate parks, according to some of the skaters interviewed, was thus embedded in Cape Town's urban development fuelling forms of race and class segregation. Skateboarding could indeed help generate socially very diverse spaces, but it could also be used as a means to regulate the presence of certain population groups in various ways (cf. Howell 2008: 480). The case of the Gardens skatepark demonstrated that the (public) promotion of skateboarding could enter quite controversial territory. To what degree skateboarding was able and intended to fuel social diversity was therefore context-dependent. It was certainly deeply entangled in the segregated realities of Cape Town and Johannesburg in manifold ways, and massively affected by the high crime rate in urban public spaces. In this respect, the promotion of skateboarding was far from being an apolitical, straightforward matter, but touched on wider social and political issues. As much as sport could contribute to promoting social integration, interaction in diversity and rupturing residential segregation, it could have the opposite effect or be used specifically for this purpose.

5.3 Race, class and gender in the South African skateboarding industry

At the end of this chapter, I turn to the commercial sector of skateboarding to consider the significance of racialised class relations in the subcultural economy. Here, I focus on the (re)production of racialised inequalities and their consequences in post-apartheid class society that maintained particular significance in a highly commercialised sport and subculture (Bond 2004: 53; Cronje 2015; Horne 2019b: 814; Magubane 1979: 1f.). During my fieldwork among South African skateboarders, I was recurrently astonished about how commercial aspects of skateboarding culture were regarded as a matter of course and sometimes even as an appreciated characteristic by skaters. This became particularly evident when certain brands and companies were regarded a valued part of

skateboarding culture, their consumption, use and production regarded in itself an element of a skateboarding lifestyle. Companies and other commercial actors played a central role in skateboarding, particularly regarding media platforms, event and competition formats, the formation of professional skateboard teams and crews, and the construction and maintenance of skateparks. Skateboarding culture has been profoundly permeated by capitalist commercialisation from its very beginning, not unlike other sports and subcultures that have been popularised in the latter half of the 20th century (Borden 2019: 84; Peters 2016: 205). In this regard, skateboarding is distinct from ‘traditional’ sports, like football, rugby, cricket or cycling, that had been popularised as non-commercial endeavours and were commercialised later on, and which featured institutional structures that were rather loosely connected to commercial actors. According to Yochim, skateboarding “never enjoyed a pre-capitalist moment when it existed primarily for a mythically pure subcultural group” (Yochim 2007: 91). Skateboarding was, one could say, fundamentally shaped by the commercial context within which it evolved and could be regarded as a “symptom of the emergence of culture and identity as increasingly important outputs of capitalistic production processes” (Dinces 2011: 1514). Indeed, non-commercial, traditional forms of institutionalisation and organisation, for example through clubs and associations, played little role in skateboarding’s history. Skateboarding had remained a thoroughly informal, market-based and highly fluid sport and subculture.²²⁰ Although there was a small group of dedicated skaters who lobbied for skateboarding, got involved in the construction of public skateparks, and organized events without commercial interests, larger infrastructural projects and event and workshop formats were almost exclusively driven by commercial actors. Due to the market-induced dynamics, such commercial activities and infrastructures sometimes came and went quickly. In this sense, skateboarding had developed a somehow fragile existence.²²¹ However, as a result of increasing public support for skateboarding, such as the construction of skateparks, government funding for skateboarding workshops, the popularisation of new, recurring event formats like Street League (Snyder 2017: 133), and the inclusion of skateboarding in the Olympics, the impact of market forces had been pushed back somewhat and skateboarding had achieved a greater degree of stability and formal organisation outside purely commercial spheres in the 2010s. As former professional skateboarder Adrian Day summed up in a film clip, the sport had once been ostracised in society at large, but was now

220 Pappalardo, Anthony (27.12.2019): Skateboarding is not progressive: poking holes in perception, Artless, online-source: <https://anthonypappalardo.substack.com/p/skateboarding-is-not-progressive> [accessed: 15.11.2022].

221 Traditional sports, which were institutionalised through (originally) non-commercial entities, thus had an organisational advantage in that they could not be fundamentally shaken in their foundations by the forces of capitalist markets.

publicly promoted (cf. Beal 2013: 106).²²² By the end of the 2010s, it was hard to imagine that the sport would once again lose its economic basis and importance as drastically as it did recurrently until the early 1990s.

5.3.1 The subcultural market

Despite a development towards greater institutional stability, skateboarding's market-induced fragility had become somehow ideologically imprinted in the local sport and subculture. Many skateboarders I spent time with paid great attention to what was happening in 'the market' and a recurring topic of conversation among skaters was the question of whether the skateboard market was shrinking, growing or stagnant, which was considered essential for assessing the sport's future survival. Such debates could also be found in skateboarding media. The capitalist market dynamics affecting the sport and subculture were regarded as an almost 'natural phenomenon', and many skateboarders advocated that through conscious action market forces could be pushed into a direction beneficial to the sport. Exemplarily, the former South African professional skateboarder Adrian Day argued in an article in *Session Skateboard Magazine* that skateboarders had to act conscious in the market environment to let it develop in the 'right direction':

“Skateboarding seems to have settled in to a comfortable place in many ways. Whilst some companies and people are gone as quickly as they came, this is also a necessary ingredient for the establishment of skateboarding in terms of the bigger picture. Some skate companies have closed and another magazine is gone, but this is perhaps necessary in avoiding a saturation in the market place that makes it harder for everyone. In many ways, the fewer companies there are the better, so long as they are building and making things bigger and better all the time. 100 companies all focusing on the same market share could result in slow progression due to piss poor profits and turn around. This is why it is important to support the local companies who get shit done, be it media, hardgoods, retailers, whoever.” (Day 2008: 41)

It was precisely because in a highly commercialised sport market dynamics caused unpredictable effects to a certain extent and did not necessarily meet the needs of the skateboarders, however, that observation of the market and attempts to steer market dynamics had turned into central subcultural topics. Many skaters held a fundamental scepticism towards companies lacking a tight connection to skateboarding as a 'culture'. This was based on the assumption that such companies entered the

222 CNN (n.d.): South Africa's skateboarders are kick-flipping to the next level [video], CNN, online-source: <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2021/10/04/skateboarding-south-africa-tokyo-olympics-olympians-spc.cnn> [accessed: 5.10.2021].

skateboarding market solely for the sake of economic profit generation, but not out of ‘appreciation’ of the culture and the will to promote the sport (Schweer 2014: 140). In contrast, companies and particularly small businesses run by skateboarders, which were said to not only have a commercial interest but also aim to promote skateboarding out of an idealistic stance, were highly regarded²²³, as the statement of skater Keagan exemplified.

Keagan: Ya, and that’s why we are trying to create our own market and not fall into the market that was already created by all of this existing skateboard industry guys. Like I said, they are just worried about turnout, but not investing back into skateboarding.

Companies which were owned by (former professional) skateboarders, and were producing directly skateboarding related products and services were regarded in particular high esteem and actively supported. Dedicated skaters preferred to buy products from brands that they perceived as ‘authentic’, ‘skater-run’ skate companies, and local companies and stores in particular (Schäfer 2020: 295; Snyder 2017: 144).²²⁴ Companies regarded as being non-authentic, perceived as striving solely for economic profits, on other hand, were perceived as potentially harming skateboarding culture by drawing capital from the subcultural market sphere (Schweer 2014: 140f.):

Yusuf: The money which comes from people who don’t skateboard and the expectations that they have on skateboarding is always about their interest in how much money they make of it and not about what’s good for the sport, or what’s good for the athlete.

As other authors have aptly commented, among skateboarders the perception was common that skateboarding culture was sustained by a somewhat distinct market (cf. Beal/Wilson 2004: 37; Schweer 2014: 140). As Snyder described, this idea built on the imagination that a subcultural economy was run by members of the subculture itself, who, due to their insider status and personal connection to the activity, would strive to keep the sport and subculture alive:

223 According to Iain Borden, a characteristic aspect of western skateboarding culture has been the attempt “to inaugurate a separate circuit of capital which exists entirely within skaters, skaters buying from other skaters, who in turn reinvest in skateboarding by providing not only better equipment but also sponsorship for skaters, skate events, ramps and so on” (Borden 2001: 157).

224 However, the large, international corporations Adidas and Nike, at times controversially discussed in skateboarding (Schweer 2014: 140), had also established themselves in South Africa at the time of research and were mostly perceived as legitimate brands, especially since they employed professional skaters and produced recognized skate media.

“Skateboarders retain ownership in their companies’ distribution and media, and in doing so they create opportunities for themselves in the form of subculture careers and for future skaters by providing a subcultural enclave for skaters to flock to.” (Snyder 2017: 165)

However, such a romantic imagination of the workings of the skateboarding industry were not necessarily reflected in reality, as skateboarding and its associated commercial market had always been closely intertwined with other commercial spheres throughout its history (Schweer 2014: 139).²²⁵ This concerned the professional sector in particular. Fundamentally, skateboarding’s ability to produce economic value had never lain primarily in the sale of products to skateboarders, as one might expect. In fact, the sale of skate-products played a relatively small role in the market sphere regarding the funding of important, quasi-formal pillars of skateboarding like events, media production and sponsorship of professional athletes. Instead, economically of high importance was skateboarding’s employment as a marketing tool for products sold in context not directly related to skateboarding, particularly for the clothing and shoe industry (cf. Snyder 2012: 310). In fact, professional skateboarding was particularly dependent on economic capital from outside the subcultural market sphere. In interviews with experienced skaters working in the local skate industry, this point was often elicited, such as by Brian:

Brian: And that’s what it [professional skateboarding] is all about. It is all about marketing and making your brand seem cool, that is what the skateboarders do. And that’s how skateboarding has always survived. The skateboarders get paid to be associated with a brand and to wear the product, to make it seem cool, so that people buy product and so, that is a big part of, you could say skateboarding is a sport, or an art, and that’s why people get into it, but the money in skateboarding has always come from industry and selling product. Because why should people get paid, who is gonna pay someone to fly around the world and ride a skateboard? Why should anybody care, where does the money come from? The money comes from selling products, it always has. [...] How skateboarding has always survived is, it’s cool and it’s influential. And the skateboarders wear it and the general public sees it and then they want to buy too, because what the skateboarders are wearing is cool. And when the general public buys it that is a lot of people spending a lot of money, and that sustains the whole thing.

225 In addition, the assumption could be questioned whether (former) pro-skateboarders were really more humane and idealistic capitalists who supported aspiring skaters than non-skateboarding owners of companies. The precarious working conditions described later and numerous stories of skateboarding entrepreneurs who cared primarily about their own wallets stood against the assumption that companies founded and run by skaters were to be thought as more idealistic and less exploitative (cf. Snyder 2017: 73).

From the perspective of such insiders, the entire narrative around a separate skateboard market was an illusion. Because the skateboarding market was quite small, especially in a country like South Africa where it led a niche existence, products advertised with the professional sport had not necessarily a closer connection with the subculture. The sponsorship of professional skateboarders, hosting of events, construction and operation of skateparks as well as the production of media was impossible to accomplish without attracting sponsors who had no tight connection to skateboarding but still wanted to benefit from its cool image. Many jobs in the skateboarding industry were correspondingly related to the production and marketing and encompassed tasks like filming, photography, video editing, text production for websites and magazines, shoe and clothing design, graphical and digital art, and website design (Snyder 2017: 10). Due to its dependence on other markets in which skateboarding was employed as a marketing tool, it was to a considerable extent subject to the dynamics of these markets²²⁶ (Borden 2019: 57f.). The sceptical view many skaters held regarding the influence of capital from other markets on the skateboarding market actually seemed to result partly from this very relationship. Skateboarding and its professional athlete's sector were not separate realms, but highly dependent on cross-market capital flows, which consequently had a great influence on the commercial world of skateboarding and therefore on skateboarding culture. This was all the more the case because even supposedly authentic core companies were part of major corporations. Uninformed consumers were tempted to assume a much higher number of independently acting businesses than there actually were due to the splitting of large companies into countless sub-entities. This was true for many of the skateboarding related companies active in South Africa (cf. Dinces 2011: 1524). For example, the legendary shoe manufacturer Vans was incorporated in 2004 by the VF Corporation, a stock exchange-listed major US corporation²²⁷. Element and DC Shoes, two other iconic skateboarding brands, were owned by Boardriders Inc., a corporate having several action-sport-brands under its wing. The majority owner of Boardriders Inc., though, was Oaktree Capital Management²²⁸, one of the largest credit investors globally²²⁹. Seemingly 'authentic' companies were in many cases just playing balls of major

226 As illustrated in the chapter on the historical development of skateboarding, investments by large companies, such as Pepsi in the 1970s and Swatch in the 1980s had each contributed to skateboarding's popularity in South Africa. During the fieldwork in the late 2010s, large corporations, such as Adidas, Nike and Red Bull, played an important role in promoting professional skateboarding and commercial events.

227 Men's journal (05.12.2019): VF Corp to buy Vans for \$396-Million Dollars, Men's Journal, online-source: <https://www.adventuresportsnetwork.com/sport/surf/vf-corp-to-buy-vans-for-396-million-dollars/#JC1RLmmeBORmuemj.97> [accessed: 25.07.2019].

228 Carberry, Joe (16.01.2018): Oaktree Capital Explains How the Quiksilver/Billabong Merger Will Save Two Iconic Brands, The Inertia, online-source: <https://www.theinertia.com/surf/oaktree-explains-how-the-quirksilver-billabong-merger-will-save-two-iconic-brands/> [accessed: 25.07.2019].

229 Atlas, Riva (21.01.2001): Company in trouble? They're waiting, The New York Times, online-source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/01/21/business/company-in-trouble-theyacutere-waiting.html> [accessed:

corporates (cf. Borden 2019: 55). Despite these facts, the perception that the skateboarding market could be handled like an independent market sphere, and that authentic companies would promote the sport partly out of idealistic, non-commercial intentions was still a widespread thought among skateboarders I met in the field. This was possibly related to the marketing practices of the industry as commercial players recurrently claimed authenticity as ‘skater-owned companies and brands’ (Beal/Wilson 2004: 37; Dinces 2011: 1518; Schweer 2014: 142). Such marketing technique was effectively carried by commercial skateboarding media which, as I have demonstrated earlier, played a decisive role for the subculture. For example, skateboarders could find out which skateboard brands were authentic and worth supporting in recognised skateboarding media publications, like in a listing in the renowned Sidewalk Magazine:

“The criteria used to select the brands featured varies – some are included due to their commitment to technological innovation and for their efforts to improve the products they offer through experimentation, others are included for what they offer in terms of cultural depth and for their contributions to skateboarding culture as a whole, whether that be through graphics, video output or simple attitude. [...] The oldest featured was founded over 44 years ago, the newest only 2 years ago, but what each skateboard brand on this list shares is a commitment to pushing skateboarding as a culture and an activity that can be enjoyed by everyone, regardless of age, race, gender or any other variable you care to name.”²³⁰

Accordingly, the assumption of having to influence the market in terms of the subculture by supporting the right companies and brands was an influential idea. Which branded clothing was worn and which equipment was ridden was thus not only a question of taste among skaters, but constitutive of a committed skateboarding lifestyle (cf. Dinces 2011: 1514; Dupont 2014: 21f.; Peters 2016: 171). In the professional sphere, this was expressed by the fact that athletes who allowed themselves to be drawn into the marketing practices of recognised companies and brands, like Vans, Element and DC, enjoyed particular prestige. Athletes, on the other hand, who worked for companies and brands that had no direct connection to skateboarding could not count on such recognition. In Cape Town, for example, professional skater Jean-Marc Johannes was controversially discussed in the scene because he received sponsorship from companies that produced alcoholic beverages, watches or energy drinks, and maintained no closer ties to

25.07.2019].

230 Powell, Ben (14.06.2017): Skateboard Brands: An A – Z: From Alien Workshop to Zero: 20 of the best skateboard brands in the world, Sidewalk Magazine, online-source: <https://sidewalkmag.com/skateboard-gear/advice/skateboard-brands.html> [accessed: 19.08.2019].

skateboarding. What products one bought, what events one attended and what sponsors one rode for, all this was very important to many devoted skateboarders.

My observations and considerations outlined in the following refer primarily to observations I have made in Cape Town. The city had developed into the economic hub of skateboarding in South Africa since the 2000s with the move of skateboarding entrepreneurs from cities such as Johannesburg and Durban to the southern tip of the country. In a way, Cape Town had become the Los Angeles of South African skateboarding. Central players of the skateboarding industry were living and working in Cape Town when I was conducting fieldwork in the late 2010s: local managers and representatives of brands and corporates relevant in skateboarding, like Adidas, Vans, Element and Red Bull, the small editorial staff of the only commercial skateboarding magazine in the country, *Session*, and most professional skateboarders. Numerous prestigious skateboarding events took place in the city. It was not unusual to meet some of the country's top skateboarders on the street, in a bar or in a skatepark. The commercial skatepark 'The Shred' had established itself as a venue for high-profile skateboarding events, such as the international Vans Park Series. Several skate NGOs were running more or less ambitious programs in and around the city. One could also find numerous surf and skate shops in Cape Town's CBD and near popular surf spots like Muizenberg (the iconic corner shop was still open and running, and it still displayed surf and skate equipment). The 'Baseline' skate shop in particular, called 'Baseline' was a recognised core-skateboarders shop and a common meeting place of the who-is-who of professional South African skateboarding. Moreover, the bar and restaurant 'Yours Truly' had become a known nightlife hub for the local scene. The design and offerings did not distinguish this bar from other upmarket bars and cafés aimed at a younger, hip clientele which was mirrored in the prices and the visitors, the latter being mainly affluent South Africans and tourists from Western Europe and North America. Although skateboarders did not form the majority of the visitors, it was considered a skateboarders' bar for two reasons. Skate videos were occasionally screened, and the bar was especially known for attracting the who-is-who of South African skateboarding²³¹; it was the perfect place to bump into professional athletes, artists, media producers, NGO professionals and (some) business representatives of the skateboarding industry.

231 Occasionally video premieres and 'aftershow parties' related to skate events took place there. Numerous established skateboarders I met liked to go to Yours Truly after work or after a skating session, at least if they were busy downtown. Another reason for the bar's image was certainly that the place was marketed through skateboarding. Connected to a tourist hostel, presenting itself as a bar of and for the 'urban cool' seemed to be a lucrative business model, and skateboarding fit well into this image. In addition, the owners collaborated with the renowned company VANS.

Cape Town's established status as a tourist destination and its manifold international business connections (particularly regarding the finance, insurance and film industry) had a visibly beneficial impact on the local skateboarding scene and industry. I recurringly bumped into skateboarders from North America, Europe and other African countries during my stay. Some were on vacation in Cape Town, others were in town for work or study. Unlike in Johannesburg, many skaters in Cape Town seemed to be quite used to the perceptible coming and going of foreign skateboarders. The greater significance of tourism opened up economic opportunities for some skateboarders, too. Two small (long)board manufacturers, for example, could sell lucratively to tourists. A number of NGOs and 'voluntourism' companies offered skate related activities and 'volunteering jobs' in local skateboarding programs to young Westerners. Occasionally, talented local skateboarders were able to find project-based employment in the film industry when skilled skateboarders were sought for film shootings. Such jobs didn't transport much credibility in the skate scene, but payment did usually surpass what was common in the skate industry by many times over. Overall, there was quite a spectrum of economic opportunities for skaters to be found in the 'mother city'. In a way, Cape Town was to South African skateboarding what Los Angeles was to US skateboarding, it was the national 'Mecca' and economic hub of the sport. The unique status of Cape Town was underlined for me when skaters from other cities described their impressions, like Robert who had grown up in Johannesburg and as an advanced skater maintained very good contacts to the Capetonian skate scene:

Robert: I don't know, like Cape Town, like ya the scene is way bigger than here, way bigger bro. Like the market, the market there, like people are making money. Like here [in Johannesburg] people aren't making money from skating.

Interviewer: I see.

Robert: Guys that have shops and shit.

Interviewer: True.

Robert: Like there are shops like Skate Emporium [in Johannesburg], they probably like just making it, like just paying for the rent and stuff.

Interviewer: Ya, the guy was telling me, I was asking him.

Robert: Yeah, like I know because I know the skate scene in Joburg is like fucked. Like, there is a skate scene, but it's literally just skaters. So it's, there is no scene outside of that. So if you are not a skater, you are not gonna buy a board. Like in Cape Town there

is guys buying Thrasher shirts, they don't even skate, they are buying like all these skate brands. It's not like that here, bra.

Cape Town was the place to be for skateboarders looking for income opportunities in the relatively small industry. In fact, some of the skate industry's inner circle in Cape Town consisted of Johannesburg expats, who had built their credibility as street skateboarders in the gritty 'city of gold', but had moved to the highly regulated, tidied up areas of Cape Town to stay connected to the skateboarding industry, and enjoy a more relaxed and scenic skateboarding lifestyle. As illustrated in the chapter on the history of skateboarding in South Africa, the economic centre of the skate industry seemed to have shifted from Durban to Johannesburg, to then move to Cape Town after the transformation. During my field research between 2016 and 2020, Cape Town was undoubtedly the (inter)national hub and economic centre of South African skateboarding.

5.3.2 Commercialisation and subcultural entrepreneurialism

Ambitions to engage in the market and push its development in the 'right direction' were not limited to the consumption of products and the employment as professional skateboarder for the 'right' companies, but also by general business activities in the 'subcultural economic space'. As Snyder had aptly put it, "[s]kateboarding as a culture advances and codifies the idea of the subculture career" (Snyder 2017: 166). Entrepreneurship was for many skaters an essential part of a skateboarding lifestyle, and starting and running skateboarding companies and businesses or 'hustling' some deals on the side was certainly highly regarded (cf. Borden 2019: 50). Recurrently, economic developments and opportunities in skateboarding were discussed in the subcultural and public discourse. Skateboarding entrepreneur and activist Donovan Fourie illustrated in an interview how small-scale activism and mentoring young skaters could go hand in hand with entrepreneurial incentives and education:

"[Interviewer:] You also sponsor skaters and mentors young skaters off and on the board. Tell us a bit more about that, what motivates you, who have you helped and what difference do you think it makes?"

[Fourie:] I currently have sponsorship agreements with seven skaters who all play a major role in promoting the company. We work together as a team to create content for all our marketing and promotional campaigns as well as selling our retail gear in the community. I mentor skaters by assisting them to build their brand for themselves as an individual skater within the industry as well as to become an influential skateboarder

within the local skate community. I educate my team on the business of skateboarding, content rights, getting compensated to advertise and market other brands who want to use their content for business or marketing, how sponsorships work and how to work together with your sponsors, and how to have a professional business approach to the industry. I also advise partners/investors a lot about the supply chain in the retail side of our business and how to ace profits and work on demand structures etc. Throughout my mentorship I've realised that my team riders have a whole new understanding on how the industry works and actually know what it takes to make a success out of their skateboarding careers.”²³²

Even NGOs engaged in social work through skateboarding claimed that the sport would open up economic opportunities for children and youth, and introduce entrepreneurial mentalities and values to children and youth beneficial in other areas of (work) life. For example, the Capetonian NGO Nebula proclaimed to teach children and adolescents its skateboard workshops “creative- and self-expression combined with entrepreneurial activity”²³³. The NGO Indigo proclaimed that one of the goals of their program was “creating and pushing for employment within the skateboarding industry for the South African youth”²³⁴. The permeation of skateboarding by neoliberal ideology and entrepreneurial values, with some skaters striving for the ideal of the “self-optimising entrepreneur” (Reihling 2020: 80), as attributed by numerous authors to US and European skateboarding, seemed thus quite present in South African skateboarding in various ways (cf. Beal/Wilson 2004; Dinces 2011; Howell 2008; O'Connor 2016: 41; Peters 2016: 218; Snyder 2017: 166). It seemed to me that more than in other sports and subcultures that I was familiar with, involvement was linked to economic activities and opportunities.

I got to know numerous skateboard entrepreneurs in various economic spheres such as board manufacturing, import and wholesale of skateboarding products, brand management and marketing, webdesign, media production, event organisation, social entrepreneurialism, import and wholesale, and skatepark construction and operation. The working conditions, working time and income of entrepreneurs and workers in the skateboarding sector differed considerably. As in other spheres of class society, in the context of skateboarding there were White and blue collar workers, workers and capital owners, winners and losers, exploiters and exploited. Despite the very different work and

232 n.d. (05.05.2023): Skate Resurrection: After a 13 year break Gauteng skateboarder Donovan Fourie returns from the wilderness to found Clip Skateboards, blunt magazine, online-source: <https://bluntmagza.com/skate-resurrection-after-a-13-year-break-gauteng-skateboarder-donovan-fourie-returns-from-the-wilderness-to-found-clip-skateboards/> [accessed: 15.06.2023].

233 Nebulaskate (15.06.2015): What do we really do? And where are we going?, Nebula: Where stars are born, online-source: <https://nebulaskateboarding.wordpress.com/> [accessed: 1.5.2016].

234 Indigo Youth Movement (n.d.): How we roll, Indigo Youth Movement [website], online-source: <https://indigoyouthmovement.org/about/> [accessed: 25.6.2021].

income situation of entrepreneurial skaters, most of them saw themselves not only as business men, but also as active promoters of skateboarding culture in South Africa, in some cases perceiving or depicting their commercial activities as a form of subcultural activism. In the short-lived Gravity magazine, which had aimed to illuminate South African downhill skateboarding, an interview caught my attention in which an aspiring online trader summed up the intersection of commercial activity and altruistic activism:

“Longboarding SA isn’t one of the billion-dollar companies whose sole agenda is those figures on the bank statement and the new Jag they’ll be able to buy. The company is a labour of love for longboarding and just plain skateboarding, pure and simple. The focus always has been and always will remain on skaters and helping them do what they love.” (Gravity 1/2: 33)

Offering skateboarding related products and services was often considered or depicted beneficial to the subculture and sport. Authentic businesses seemed to escape the cool rationality of commercial transactions and aim instead at downright altruistic motives like supporting marginalised skaters and ‘the culture of skateboarding’. Each business in its own way seemed to play a part in preserving and promoting the sport and subculture. Street traders like Ayusch, for example, claimed to play an important role for street skaters in downtown Johannesburg, supplying them with skate equipment that was hard to come by, especially for skaters who did not have access to individual motorised transport to visit the few skate shops in the city. His prices were fair and he made only small profits from his business (it was just enough for him and his family to survive). An entrepreneur like Brian, on the other hand, played an important role as a producer of one of the most important skateboarding publications in the country, providing skaters a media platform and the sport increased public exposure. Similarly, skatepark and skate shop owners, and social entrepreneurs, for example, considered themselves contributors to a vibrant skateboarding scene and culture. And because the working conditions in many cases were comparatively precarious compared to other economic sectors, it seemed that indeed largely people who had a certain passion for the sport and subculture were to be found in such jobs. Skateboarding entrepreneurialism conveyed an aura of respectability and for some skaters part of a genuine subcultural career was to become skateboarding entrepreneurs themselves (cf. O’Connor 2016: 41; Peters 2016: 218).

The commercialised culture of skateboarding became particularly evident when skateboarders set up businesses that were not intended to generate actual economic profits. A number of informants cultivated their own companies, brands and labels that created the appearance of commercial

enterprises without actually being such. Unlike business ventures that simply never 'took off', such projects did not pursue any economic motives at all, although they appeared as if they would. Cape Town skateboarder Samuel ran such a pretend company. He was making a living through a full time job and was not striving for an increase of his economic income when founding a little skateboarding company. His side-business was a non-commercial pastime for which he designed a logo and website, produced fictitious adverts and posted them on social media, and occasionally produced a small number of branded merchandise and distributed it among befriended skaters. In these adverts Samuel himself and selected friends would appear as athletes sponsored by the company. In a way, such pretend-companies acted as symbolical devices to increase the value of a skater's self-presentation by playing with the illusion of professional sponsoring. In a sense, the perceived value and reputation of athletes was increased when they were supported by (certain) commercial actors, quite similar to the perception of sponsorship in other sporting cultures. Lacking access to sponsorship deals, some skaters simply created their own authentic companies for support, hinting towards the commercialised character of skateboarding culture. Subcultural engagement and activism blended in various ways with entrepreneurial activities and intentions (cf. Dinces 2011: 1522). Skateboarding could indeed be understood as a space permeated by a neoliberal ethos or ideology (cf. Beal/Wilson 2004; Dinces 2011; Howell 2008).

Yet, such quasi-commercial platforms nevertheless had limited reach and impact compared to those of large companies and brands. Despite the easy accessibility of online platforms, digital tools and social media, established commercial actors had a strong advantage due to historically grown reputation, large viewer and subscriber numbers of their online channels, and the ability to finance high-quality media productions and sponsor professional skaters. This favoured that the big companies and actors that had grown in the course of history remained sustainably influential, and the skateboarding industry was subject to a certain inertia, which had a direct impact on its social composition. The inequalities and divisions that came with this had a more or less direct impact on the prestigious spheres of the skateboarding economy and professional skateboarding, as I will illuminate in the following.



swtch.

a shitty company.

Illustration 21: Advert of the pretend-company 'swtch' disseminated through social media channels. Without a doubt, some kind of parody of skateboarding culture, in which the entrepreneurial paradigm was ironically commented on, resonated in such social media posts (source: Swtch Skateco (10.09.2020): swtch. a shitty company, facebook, online-source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=625055444935561&set=pb.100022933338964.-2207520000..&type=3> [accessed: 15.09.2020]).

5.3.3 Racialised Class inequalities in the skateboarding industry

As mentioned before, the skateboarding industry showed similarities to that of the South African economy as a whole. The demographic structure of the South African skateboarding industry and its inner socio-cultural realities were not ‘progressive’, in the way of promoting the meaningful participation and involvement of the once marginalised, but fitted rather seamlessly into the wider realities of the racialised class society and its tendency to reproduce historically grown societal power relations.²³⁵ The legacy of historically developed racialised class relations was particularly visible in the economic field, which stood in contrast with the comparatively diverse sphere of non-commercial, everyday skateboarding. This was insofar generally the case as South Africans of colour were heavily overrepresented in blue collar jobs and precarious self-employment, while they were negligible in number in white-collar jobs and as business and capital owners in the skateboarding industry (cf. Sulla/Zikhali 2018: 39). Lucrative positions in the skateboarding economy, like company ownership, brand and team management, filming, photography and media production, and other creative and white-collar jobs, were largely in White hands. The skateboarding industry reflected the wider racialised class structure that had historically developed in South Africa and still carried significant inertia after the end of apartheid (Magubane 1979: 2; Maseko 2022: 367). The characteristic problem that the transformation to democracy had hardly touched the structure of the White dominated economy, and that there had been hardly any relevant redistribution of land and economic capital (Marais 2011: 204, 208; Mbembe 2008b: 6; Terreblanche 2002: 58), did not stop at the doorstep of the skateboarding industry. In this regard, what authors such as Wolpe, Cabral and Magubane (1979: 227) had identified as culturalised, ethnicised and racialised elements in once colonial economies and racial capitalism in general, could be observed in the South African skateboarding industry on a small scale (Mabasa 2022: 231; Terreblanche 2002: 58).

235 This basically affected virtually all possible sectors of the South African skateboarding industry, such as commercial skateparks, companies that built skateparks, skate shops, clothing manufacturers and NGOs (social enterprises), which were characterised by a similar racialised class structure as the general South African economy. The entrepreneurs and managers were often White, but the ordinary workers were Coloured or Black. The casualness with which this ‘colonial order’ was taken for granted, especially among White South Africans and Westerners in this environment, astonished me time and again during fieldwork.



Illustration 22: One afternoon, I was invited to a construction session at a skatepark close to Pretoria where a skate crew intended to build a new obstacle. On arrival, I was surprised to see the group of White skaters braaing and enjoying beers in the shade and go for a ride in the park now and then while a group of Black construction workers was working under the blazing sun. The skaters supervised the workers and gave instructions so that the obstacle was properly built. The reproduction of racialised class inequalities within the skateboarding scene became highly visible in situations like this.

The existing inequalities caused multiple tensions and divisions among skateboarders. Yet, controversial discussions about the racialised realities in the industry were occasionally raised by some groups and athletes, yet, seldom in the public sphere and particularly not in the largely commercial, public discourse which worked primarily under a marketing focus sugarcoating the realities on the backstage. Critical discussions on the situation in the industry were held in private circles, but there often with surprising clarity, especially from those disadvantaged by the prevailing circumstances. Experienced skateboarders I met criticised not only generally exploitative tendencies in the industry, but also the reproduction of a White hegemony and the exclusion of skateboarders of colour from profitable, prestigious sections of the economy and media sphere. In professional

skateboarding, the reproduction of social inequalities was particularly visible in public and was correspondingly frequently addressed. Even though the top professionals in the country were a diverse group, there was still a clear preponderance of White skaters that did not reflect the true demographic composition of the sport, and even less that of the country as a whole. Ayusch strongly criticised this circumstance in an interview after we had visited a promotional event in 2018:

Ayusch: It is like they [inner circle of the skateboarding industry] only hook up their friends. Like you tell me, in fucking 2018 you gonna have a, you gonna have an all-White team in South Africa, you know. There is no, and some guys are, I don't want to name names, but some people were still on that bus, you know?

Interviewer: Like regarding what?

Ayusch: I am saying regarding sponsors, they gonna have an all-White team, in 2018. [...] In 2018, does that seem right to you?

Interviewer: I mean quite a number of guys told me they think apartheid found its way into skateboarding, that's what they kinda, they are addressing this a lot like especially in Cape Town. They say like the whole, the skate industry is dominated by White people.

Ayusch: Well it is dude.

Interviewer: The magazines, the shops.

Ayusch: It is, it's still a very White run fucking industry, dude. [...] Like, like I told you, I am not here to make enemies. I don't want to bring in the fucking segregation and apartheid into skateboarding, but I can't also tell a blind eye to the shit that I am seeing.

Interviewer: Absolutely.

Ayusch: So like I think it needs to be adressed, people need to speak about it some time. But, ya, those homies are right [...] The skate industry needs to fucking answer, you understand, because it's just like in 2000 and something you have an all White team. And then you gonna say you represent South Africa.

In Cape Town, there was a widespread impression among experienced skaters of colour I met that careers in the industry were closed to them because they were shielded by a small circle of White entrepreneurs in the skateboarding industry (cf. Williams 2020: 274), which seemed to be permeated by White networks and “institutional whiteness” (Nobis/Lazaridou 2023: 35). This was perhaps most visible in the circumstance that all the big-name skateboard brands and companies were owned, managed or represented by White South Africans and Westerners. From the point of

view of some skaters of colour, South Africans of colour were held off from the most prestigious positions in the industry. The extent to which this was due to racist mentalities or structural factors was controversially discussed among skaters. Since race and class structurally overlapped heavily in South Africa, some skaters were arguing that exclusion occurred at the class level but appeared racialised.



Illustration 23: At a vert skateboarding competition in Paarden Island, Cape Town, sponsored by a popular US-American brand, the inner circle of the South African skateboarding industry gathered and watched the spectacle from the VIP area (back left in the picture). On such occasions it seemed to become visible what numerous skateboarders of colour openly criticised in interviews and conversations: that the commercial sphere was (still) largely in the hands of White South Africans and Westerners, and was not mirroring the countries social diversity.

As I have demonstrated earlier in this chapter, the position in the racialised class society was very influential in determining the degree of freedoms and opportunities for individuals to engage in skateboarding in the first place (cf. Snyder 2017: 57; Wacquant 2004: 42f.). Class privileged skateboarders had considerable advantages in many respects when it came to engaging in

skateboarding as a sport and subculture. For a career in the skateboarding industry economic and social capital and the ability to build social ties into class privileged spheres were highly relevant. In particular, it was necessary to establish good contacts with the subcultural economic elite in the 'mother city' to access economic opportunities. Socialising with the 'right people' in- and outside skateboarding related activities was in certain regards much more important than the actual skateboarding. In this way, numerous class related lifestyle elements came into play that had not necessarily much to do with the sport itself. One could say that successfully working in the skateboarding industry required a certain habitus and the ability to play according to the 'rules of the game' in a Bourdieuan sense (Bourdieu 1987: 252ff.; Bourdieu 2001: 47). In a society still heavily segregated, this was not easily possible for many. It also required a certain amount of economic capital, which was a massive advantage for the time-consuming activities in an economy that tended to be precarious with few lucrative places. In addition, the presence of economic capital was an immediate advantage, as it allowed to buy into or take over existing businesses.

The skateboarding industry was dominated by middle and upper class White South Africans²³⁶, who were skateboarders themselves and some had professional careers behind them. Consequently, the socio-cultural world permeating the industry and professional skateboarding was rather White and class privileged, and it had little to do with the lifeworld of the poor majority (of skaters) in South Africa. In Cape Town, this was spatially evident in that the economic players resided in the largely class privileged city centre and surrounding suburbs, ran their businesses and spent much of their skating and leisure time there as well (cf. Bourdieu 1987: 207).²³⁷ One usually didn't meet businessmen of the skateboarding industry in skateparks and shebeens in the poor neighbourhoods. If one wanted to maintain contacts with this circle, one had to be able and feel confident to access class privileged spheres in Cape Town.

A recurring theme when inquiring class marginalised skateboarders in Cape Town, who had made experiences with the local skateboarding industry, was the critique of the exclusive manner of how business was done in it, which seemed to stand in contrast with the proclaimed meritocratic ethos of the sport and subculture, and its connection to (marginalised) street cultures. The spaces where skateboarding's economic elite socialised, conducted business and negotiated (sponsorship) deals

236 The skateboarding sector reflected the perpetuation of economic inequalities in the society and the social structure of the economy as a whole, in which large parts of the economy had remained in White hands. Skateboarding in South Africa was also not fundamentally different from general structures of commercial sports in the United States and Western Europe in this regard where similar observations could be made (cf. Budd 2001: 7).

237 In my fieldwork I met some of the important economic players of the South African skateboarding industry, including local entrepreneurs, 'white-collar workers' of big international skateboarding companies (such as event organisers, marketing experts and team managers) and professional skateboarders. All meetings took place in class privileged districts with a largely White, class privileged demography in and around the city core as the informants resided in these areas.

were rather hard to access for class marginalised skaters, or they did not feel comfortable or valued in the corresponding socio-cultural spaces²³⁸. Quite a number of class marginalised skateboarders I met felt unable to connect to or felt uncomfortable in the social circles in the skateboarding industry. This reminded of the experiences of Black professional skateboarders feeling excluded and pushed out of lucrative employment in a White dominated economy in the US context described by Williams (2020: 175f.).

5.3.4 Denialism, hidden criticism and entrepreneurial activism

Among the members of the skateboarding industry's inner circle I was able to talk to, addressing the inequalities and exclusions did not necessarily seem to be welcomed. Some of the established skate entrepreneurs dismissed or downplayed the issues. A similar picture had already emerged when taking a closer look at blunt magazine, which had published a special issue on 'White guilt' in 2001 (see historical chapter). In it, the editor-in-chief had absolved himself (and implicitly White South Africans of his generation in general) of historical responsibility and dismissed a critique of the racialised class inequalities in skateboarding (blunt 5/2 2001: 6). I encountered similar positions in a number of interviews I conducted with White South Africans in the higher tiers of the skateboarding industry of Cape Town. They did not want to hear about the criticism of unequal and unjust structures in the skate industry, and avoided discussing race and class inequalities in the subcultural economy, like former professional skater and brand manager George:

Interviewer: Some other skateboarders were saying that there is a divide in the Capetonian skate scene, I don't know, maybe a rift in a certain way between like the Black and Coloured skating community and the White skating community. But I know that not everybody like kinda like sees it that way.

George: I, I completely disagree with that, but at the end of the day I am not a Coloured guy from the Flats, so, what they see is not what I see, you know.

Interviewer: Ya.

²³⁸ Class related inequalities and lifestyle differences among skaters were as substantial as in society as a whole. While some skaters resided in mansions, hardly had to work and were used to an expensive lifestyle, others lived in tiny houses or flats, worked all the time and still survived more or less from hand to mouth. In addition, poor skateboarders were exposed to various forms of class discrimination and exclusion in class privileged environments. These could be very obvious, such as the capital-based exclusion of poor skaters from commercial spaces and activities. Yet, class related discrimination was seldom direct and overt, but often rather subtle (Bourdieu 1987: 292). Some skaters from poor backgrounds recurrently complained about the class exclusive atmosphere and resulting feelings of intimidation and devaluation in the higher echelons of the skateboarding industry. Moreover, in the racialised class society racism and class discrimination went hand in hand, so that in some cases it was not possible for skaters to distinguish which form of discrimination and exclusion they were exposed to in certain social spaces.

George: I don't see that, like in terms of what, like, in terms of sponsorships, in terms of, you know, I don't really know what they are saying.

Interviewer: Ya, their argument was to say that even on a global level, but also in South Africa, they say the industry is still dominated by Whites, in their opinion it kinda restricts the opportunities for like people of colour so to say, at least they say there is still like a systemic thing going on.

George: So my take on that is that there was no industry at all, so people made it an industry anyway, and anyone, to be fucking honest, who chooses to make this a career, or be involved, is at a massive, massive risk anyway. You know. Like, we do it because we believe in skateboarding, and maybe we are afforded the opportunity to be in that position where we are able to like have some money at that time to buy and like do what we want with it, but at the same time that was from my side, was built on just like skating money that I got and like, I don't, I don't, and at the same time someone like Moses [Adams] should have been getting that same money at the time, or whatever, you know. But I really think that it gets down to individuals, I don't think, I really don't think there is like segregation in skateboarding, like I really don't, because, I mean, also you know guys like sit in like the [Cape] Flats and just go 'oh, we can't get jobs', they are not really going for it either, you know, what I mean. Or like trying to like, I don't know, it is a difficult thing for me to answer, because as I said I am not from the Flats, so I don't know.

The reasoning that success and access to opportunities were a result of individual talent and devotion was widespread among skateboarders in and around the exclusive business circles that I met and was able to talk to. In general, there was little willingness to address questions around historically grown structural inequalities and their effects on the skateboarding industry. This contrasted with the opinions of many skaters of colour, who had experienced racialised class inequalities and racism in the skateboarding industry, and for whom the officially proclaimed meritocratic principle appeared as merely an ideological legitimisation for the existing inequalities within the world of the sport. From their own experiences and those of fellow skaters, marginalised skaters knew that skateboarding was not and never had been a level playing field in South Africa. What Mbembe had once called “white denialism” (Mbembe 2008b: 7) seemed to play a role among some of the White skaters: A rejection of the perpetuated relevance of historically grown social structures and inequalities, especially when it comes to economic relations (cf. Terreblanche 2002: 5; Steyn 2012: 8). Without question, the colonial and apartheid past, its long-term consequences and the persistent racialised inequalities, were uncomfortable issues for many White South Africans to discuss. In a subculture that was celebrating social diversity, a meritocratic ethos and the ideal of the self-made men, the impact of structural race and class inequalities was easily dismissed. Additionally, for some skaters, the subculture was perceived and valued as a space where they could

escape the tough realities of everyday life in a society marked by drastic inequalities and historically grown injustices. Raising ‘political questions’ around the sport and the subculture was often dismissed with the argument that it would charge the playful sphere with an unwanted and inappropriate seriousness, and threaten social harmony within the scene.²³⁹ In this way, particularly class privileged White skateboarders circumvented ‘political questions’. By Nobis and Lazaridou (2023: 35), the exclusion of critical discussions about racism was described as typical of White dominated sporting spaces. In this vein, some of my interview partners had the impression that some of the affluent White skateboarders were shielding themselves from critical voices raising social issues in skateboarding, and were accordingly upset about such a dismissal of important social issues in the skateboarding community, such as Frankie:

Frankie: Are these people just completely oblivious to the fact that this is South Africa, and these situations exist? Or are they aware of the situation and want to retain it the way it is, you know. ‘Cause the guys, like Jordan [a former pro-skater and social entrepreneur], Jordan isn’t a, he is not completely oblivious to things, but he is also of the opinion that he has worked hard enough in skateboarding to occupy a high position. You know, with Patrick [owner of a commercial skatepark] them it’s like, we paid our dues and therefore we have been here. Not acknowledging that their dues were based on privilege. It’s quite weird, there is a little bubble that everyone lives in.

After such experiences and observations, some skaters of colour decided to firmly distance themselves from the it. While Frankie avoided closer contact with some influential players, he still accepted forms of collaboration and cooperation here and there. Other skaters I met, had completely cut ties, refused collaboration offers, stayed away from certain events and competitions, and generally avoided socialising with skateboarding industry. Frankie had decided to end a sponsorship deal after a disheartening experience:

Frankie: I used to get shoes from [popular shoe brand], and so like flow whatever. And when the [popular shoe brand] South Africa team released the skateboarding in South Africa [video], there was a time were we kinda split ways. But primarily because it was sharing, like you have to share all these videos and things. And one of the thing was like this [popular shoe brand] tour South Africa, and it was this group of White guys, only White guys. Right? And I was like, how different is this like skateboarding in South Africa to what you are seeing in the international clips, you know. The faces look the same, the language is the same, the attitudes are the same, you know. And also their tour of South Africa was as if they didn’t exist here.

239 Pappalardo, Anthony (27.12.2019): Skateboarding is not progressive: poking holes in perception, Artless, online-source: <https://anthonypappalardo.substack.com/p/skateboarding-is-not-progressive> [accessed: 15.11.2022].

Interviewer: Like Europeans exploring an unknown part of the world or something like that?

Frankie: Yes, exploring, you know. And I brought this up and I was like, and then I kinda like split ways with this thing. That is fucking hectic. But it's, they are oblivious and that's like the height of privilege, you just don't know. You just don't see there is a problem.

While the racialised class inequalities in South African skateboarding and especially in the sport's economy were rather obvious to experienced and informed skaters, and spoken about in private circles, they were seldom addressed and discussed in the public discourse surrounding the sport. In this respect, South African skateboarding was not a special case. In US and European skateboarding, too, there was basically no public debate in which issues and problematic dynamics in the sport and subculture were addressed (cf. Williams 2020: 274). This seemed partly due to the fact that the commercial actors playing a defining role in the public discourse had rather little motivation to promote controversial debates that could potentially damage their own reputation and business. As Anthony Pappalardo put it, there was no reporting but only advertising in the world of skateboarding media.²⁴⁰ In the commercial discourse, critical discussions about racism, class oppression and also sexism were rather overlooked or veiled accordingly by excluding these topics, apart from superficial 'diversity' debates that did not illuminate structural aspects of (reproduced) inequalities and injustices, and rather tried to emphasise skateboarding's ability to nurture social integration and 'empower' marginalised individuals. Moreover, criticising the conditions in the skateboarding industry was hardly feasible for the few skaters of colour involved in it. Particularly sponsored skaters had little choice but to condone forms of structural and direct discrimination if they wanted to continue their skateboarding careers. The critique of racialised class inequalities and divisions thus lay dormant and resulting tensions smouldered beneath the surface. In my field research this became particularly obvious when I spent an evening with a professional skater in Cape Town:

After a contest sponsored by an iconic American shoe company involving most of the skateboarding stars of the country, in which Prince, as always, had made it into the top three, I went with him and Lil G, a rap artist Prince was befriended with, to the tourist hostel where the skater was staying for a few weeks. Prince had no permanent home, his pro-skater life required frequent travel and he lived so precariously economically that he could not afford to pay rent for an apartment that he would not use continuously.

240 Pappalardo, Anthony (27.12.2019): Skateboarding is not progressive: poking holes in perception, Artless, online-source: <https://anthonypappalardo.substack.com/p/skateboarding-is-not-progressive> [accessed: 15.11.2022].

Actually, he enjoyed being on the road all the time. Rolling a spliff with a few crumbs of dagga he had been given by another skater at the contest, there was satisfaction in his words, for he had worked his way up and impressively refuted all doubters. People had made fun of him for doing this 'White thing', but he had fought for his dream and he was one of the selected few who had made it in South African professional skateboarding, on his own. To my surprise, he was proud to be a pro skater, but he held a rather grim view on the South African skateboarding scene and industry on this evening. Although he was a devoted skater himself spending much time on the board and in the company of other skaters, he did not want to get too involved with the skating scene, as many skaters would 'talk too much shit' and bore him: 'These people think skateboarding is their life'. He also loved skateboarding, but for him it was not a life-defining activity.

He also felt little at home in the social circles of the skate industry. According to Prince, it was very difficult to get into commercial circles even if you were a really talented rider. Commercial opportunities were not necessarily awarded according to performance, but especially among acquaintances in the exclusive social circles. After all, there was a larger number of really good skaters in South Africa just waiting to be sponsored. The most important resources for pro-skateboarders, sponsorships, and getting featured in skateboarding media, were guarded and blocked by a small elite. According to his perception, the elite did not want to recognise him at first either. But at some point Prince had become so good and won contests so consistently that they had no choice but to recognise and sponsor him.

Later the evening, we set off in the dark on foot for an after-contest party, which took place at the skater's bar Yours Truly in Cape Town's CBD. Prince stressed how little desire he has to go to the party were the who is who of the skateboarding industry would be present. Yet, he had to show himself at the event after having ridden in the contest where he was representing his sponsors. When we walked to the party venue through Cape Town's CBD, three White young man appeared across the street walking in the same direction as us: Two well-known amateur skateboarders and the potentially most influential skateboard videographer and film producer in South Africa. Certainly Prince had worked with him many times in the past. Prince greeted the three euphorically across the street, shouts and waves. But his greeting was only modestly answered, and the group of three kept on walking unimpressed and seemed not eager to join up with us. 'You see', Prince said to me and Lil G, 'these guys don't really like me'.

When we arrived at the bar the party was already in full swing with some of those present being visibly intoxicated from drinking beers and smoking weed. Almost all the big names of the South African skateboarding industry were present. Apart from a handful of selected top athletes of colour, this was largely a group of White, affluent men drinking, smoking and small talking, I think when entering the scene. This was certainly not a representative group for skateboarding in Cape Town, skaters from the Cape Flats, for example, were completely absent. There was also only a tiny number of women present. On the walk to the venue, Prince had underlined that he feels like an outsider in these social circles and events. And from his perspective, the fact that he is a Black South African seemed to play a relevant part in that. At the party he put on a friendly face and engaged with the crowd: small talking, laughing, sharing beers and

spliffs with Cape Town's street skateboarding elite celebrating itself. I bought Lil G and me a drink each, we chatted a little bit on the side, watched the spectacle and let Prince 'do his job'.

A little while later, the party was about to reach its apex, Prince, Lil G and me left. Prince was looking forward to spend the rest of the evening at a friend's party, dropped off on the way and I had a longer chat with Lil G for the remaining walk back to my car. Lil G stressed in the following conversation that he could relate to Prince's experience. In fact, it deeply upset him to see what Prince had to deal with, as his younger brother had made similar experiences years ago: He was about to become a professional, was courted by the exclusive business circle for a while, never really felt comfortable in this environment and was dropped as a sponsored rider immediately when he had to take a longer break due to an injury. His brother had cut all closer ties with the exclusive circle with some bitterness, turned his back on the professional world completely and continued to practise skateboarding in a purely non-commercial fashion. In the eyes of Lil G, the skateboarding industry consisted largely of White, unscrupulous businessmen who made good money under the given circumstances and made even more profit out of the young men who, highly motivated and sometimes a bit gullible, offered themselves as professional athletes without being adequately compensated, appreciated and offered long-term perspectives. What made Lil G particularly furious was that he saw similar exploitative relations in skateboarding as in the wider society. From his point of view, commercial South African skateboarding was in no way free of racism and exploitation.

Professional skateboarders like Prince were in a difficult position. For many years athletes like him had disciplined themselves to hone their skills and had managed to occupy a place among the few professionals in the country. To make it this far as a skateboarder was an extraordinary achievement, particularly for someone like him. But the fulfilment of this dream led to the sobering realisation that professional skateboarding was not fundamentally different from other spheres of society, despite the image of skateboarding being progressive and diverse. In this world, too, South Africans of colour faced a latently racist structure in which their opportunities depended on the sympathies of White capital owners, managers and other gatekeepers. All that skaters like Prince could do to live their dream as long as they could was to keep their mouths shut and make the best of the situation. It could be over at any time and what would be the alternative?

As became apparent in the episode recounted above, even among some of the country's top skateboarders inequalities and forms of discrimination within the industry were experienced and firmly criticised. Although skaters of colour were represented in greater numbers among professional athletes, they played almost no role as capital owners and in the executive echelons of influential companies. The rules of the prestigious commercial game were largely defined by White, class privileged South Africans and internationals. This situation was reminiscent of that described by other authors in the racialised realities of the American and European sports world (Budd 2001:

7; Cunningham 2021: 4). Moreover, this situation was reminiscent of the experiences of US pro skateboarders described by Williams (2020: 175f.).

The earlier mentioned (quasi-)entrepreneurial activism of some skateboarders of colour appeared in a different light when put in context to the inequalities in the skateboarding industry and scene. This activism at times explicitly aimed to make skateboarding more accessible for marginalised children, youth and young adults in the context of an exclusive subcultural economy (cf. Williams 2020: 307). Some skate entrepreneurs intended to make inexpensive equipment and infrastructure available through their business, and aimed on open up new avenues into sponsorships. Entrepreneurial activism could thus be on the verge of philanthropy. This was illustrated by examples such as the skate shop opened by Errol ‘Bong’ Strachan in Cape Town in the 1990s. Strachan elaborated that he was running this business because it allowed him to support young skaters of a marginalised background:

Errol Strachan: Ya, we used to sponsor, we helped quite a lot of kids [with the shop]. That was my whole life, I wanted to make enough money to survive, but I wanted to be able to help kids that couldn’t pay R400 or R300 for a deck, to come in and buy a blank for R120 or R130, you know that was the vibe.

Businesses that could be very small-scale or rather symbolic in quality, were at times also an attempt to create platforms outside the established skateboarding industry that could yield subcultural capital and help skateboarders pursuing a career (cf. Williams 2020: 307). In his dissertation, Williams pointed out the importance of Black-owned companies in the context of US racial capitalism. There too, skaters of colour felt excluded from resources and opportunities in the industry. Founding their own companies allowed “POC to imagine themselves beyond the labour force, as new members of the ‘creative class’ of artists, designers and innovative ideas people” (Williams 2020: 292). In this vein, South African skate crews that marketed themselves publicly, such as 20sk8 and Soweto Skate Society, sought to create platforms providing recognition and visibility to skateboarders who were excluded or ignored by the industry. Another locally well-known case in this regard was the company Funisu founded by Wandile Msomi in the early 2010s, whom I met on a few occasions and who was extremely well known among skaters of colour in South Africa. Msomi seemed to be the first bigger Black entrepreneur in the South African skateboarding business, selling equipment and boards, sponsoring a number of amateur skaters and even starting his own brand. Accordingly, the company had been called the “first black-owned

skateboard company in South Africa”²⁴¹ (cf. Borden 2019: 55). Perhaps not coincidentally, Msomi had located his company and shop in the rough inner-city of Johannesburg, not in Cape Town. Through Funisu, local skaters of colour of various skill levels were sponsored and Msomi maintained close contacts with the Soweto Skate Society and generally aimed to create exposure for the diverse inner-city skate scene of Johannesburg. In a way, Funisu reminded of DGK in the United States (Borden 2019: 26; Williams 2020: 307f.), the first Black-owned skateboarding company in the American context. The recognition Msomi received, especially in the skateboarding scene of Johannesburg, seemed correspondingly high, even years after Funisu had ceased to exist.²⁴² Companies like Funisu performed a form of entrepreneurial activism in a commercialised sport and subculture, which, however, could only develop limited effectiveness in the mirror of the historically grown structures of the economy. Even Funisu, although certainly appreciated as an authentic skate brand in the scene and commercial channels, played only a minor role in the industry and could not match the resources and international scope that the large, established companies with warm connections to industrial players in North America and Western Europe possessed. A few years after its foundation, Funisu disappeared from the scene again.

5.3.5 The glorified image of and precarious realities in professional skateboarding

Despite being deeply entangled in the inequality relations in the skateboarding industry, professional skateboarding was highly regarded by most skateboarders. Especially well-known American pro-skaters, such as Tony Hawk, Rodney Mullen, Stevie Williams, Nyjah Houston, Tony Alva, Mark Gonzales, Eric Koston and Daewon Song, had nurtured an influential and positive image of professional careers in skateboarding worldwide. Such pro-skaters seemed to lead similarly exciting and eventful lives as other sport and rock stars. Circulating snapshots of well-dressed, well-trained South African professional skaters such as Dlamini Dlamini, Khule Ngubane, Yann Horowitz, Moses Adams and Jean-Marc Johannes, captured in high gloss and rich contrasts in the best weather at extraordinary locations, seemed to underscore that also in South Africa professional careers promised prestige, an exciting lifestyle, a good income, regular trips to other countries and placements in renowned magazines, videos and events. Furthermore, professional skateboarding appeared to be the sector of the industry that marginalised skaters could access. In

241 Milburn, Dallas (17.03.2015): RAD: The Art of Skateboard Design, Issue, online-source: <https://issuu.com/dmilburn/docs/rad-issue-version> [accessed: 15.10.2021].

242 Boshomane, Pearl (12.04.2013): Showing Soweto how to roll, Times Live, online-source: <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2013-04-12-showing-soweto-how-to-roll/> [accessed: 15.9.2019].

contrast to the upper ranks in the industry, the group of South African professional skaters was diverse in terms of race and class. In a sense, unlike other spheres of the industry, the availability of class exclusive capital seemed to be less important for a career as a professional skater. Professional skateboarders like Moses Adams and Thalent Biyela²⁴³ showcased that through hard training, discipline, devotion and a bit of luck one could work oneself up from being poor or even homeless to become a publicly praised and economically secure athlete (cf. Williams 2020: 308). Adams emphasised this notion in an interview after he had received a signature deck from the renowned American company KFD:

“So here I am now, a boy who didn't have shoes to skate in, with a board named after me and I truly hope that this is an inspiration to the many young people who share the same sentiments as me. [...] Whatever you want, remember it's possible, as long as you keep your head up and push forward.”²⁴⁴

The idea of working one's way up from 'rags to riches' with a career as a professional athlete was certainly not unique to skateboarding²⁴⁵ (Atencio/Beal/Yochim 2013: 163), but was very common in the wider world of sports, especially in popular and highly commercialised sports such as football²⁴⁶, cricket and rugby (Besnier/Brownell/Carter 2017: 125; Budd 2001: 7; Wacquant 2004: 41). Certainly, many young skaters dreamt of becoming professionals at some point:

“Let's face it, if you have ever spent any significant amount of time on a skateboard, you have probably dreamt about working in 'the industry' at one point or another. How could you not! You flip through the magazines and see these people touring the world, filming, skating, partying – you'd be an idiot if you said you wouldn't want to do that for a living.”²⁴⁷

243 Dodd, Johnny (14.05.2016): Skateboard Sensation Thalente Biyela Used His Board to Escape a Tough Childhood, People, online-source: <https://people.com/celebrity/thalente-biyela-used-skateboarding-to-escape-tough-childhood/> [accessed: 15.10.2017].

244 Ruiters, Tracy-Lynn (16.01.2022): Cape pro skateboarder's name immortalised on a board, IOL, online-source: <https://www.iol.co.za/weekend-argus/entertainment/cape-pro-skateboarders-name-immortalised-on-a-board-20c0e485-4050-4cb0-9bc5-9bc78de2e7dd> [Accessed: 24.04.2022].

245 Pappalardo, Anthony (27.12.2019): Skateboarding is not progressive: poking holes in perception, Artless, online-source: <https://anthonypappalardo.substack.com/p/skateboarding-is-not-progressive> [accessed: 15.11.2022].

246 A very prominent example of this in 2018 was Tashreeq Matthews, a young footballer from the notorious Hanover Park neighbourhood in the Cape Flats who got contracted by Borussia Dortmund and represented the dream of many local footballers of 'making it' with talent, discipline and dedication into the roster of one of the top football clubs in Europe.

247 Michna, Ian (27.09.2012): How do you get a job in the skateboard industry??, Jenkem Magazine, online-source: <http://www.jenkemmag.com/home/2012/09/27/how-do-you-get-a-job-in-the-skateboard-industry/> [accessed: 23.07.2019].

Due to the rather small size of the skate scene, encounters with (former) professional athletes in skateparks and at skate spots were not a rare occurrence in Cape Town, and in the social circles of quite a few skaters I got to know there were sponsored and professional skaters. Professional skaters were rarely aloof, but just as down to earth as many non-sponsored athletes, mostly skating the same skateparks and skate spots. In this respect, professional skateboarding seemed almost tangible. Michael had seen one of his childhood friends complete an impressive journey, against all odds into the ranks of the best skaters in the country through sheer discipline, willpower and dedication:

Michael: The cool thing is he is the top skateboarder in South Africa [...]. He grew up in a one-bedroom house with two brothers, so they were three brothers and mother and father. And he is the best skateboarder in South Africa. He competed all, he is, like, everybody knows him. So it's like skateboarding when it comes to the actual tricks it's the, there is no, there is no apartheid there. You know, when it comes to who can perform on a skateboard it's like, you can't say the, you, I can't say 'yes, yes he skates better, because his parents has more money'.

In the mirror of such circulating success stories and medially celebrated 'role models' it was not surprising that among young skateboarders the belief that professional skateboarding was a potential career option was quite widespread. I realised during my fieldwork that some children, teenagers and young adults trained hard to 'make it' one day. These young skaters put a lot of effort into developing their skills (often on a daily basis), some of them had indeed already become very good skateboarders at young age, were mentored by older skaters and, in some cases, were placing in competitions, receiving their first flow sponsorships and appeared in recognised videos and magazines.²⁴⁸ In the mirror of the largely sobering options in the labour market, with many low-paid and exploitative jobs, and the generally high unemployment rate in South Africa I could understand well that especially young skaters from lower class backgrounds were dreaming of a professional career. However, this dream was built on a shaky foundation as professional skateboarding was far from being an unproblematic economic environment. It was a highly competitive sphere and profitable for only a tiny number of top performers. The overly positive image of professional skateboarding seemed to be partly the result of the glossy, media-based discourse surrounding the sport (cf. Atencio/Beal/Yochim 2013: 157). This was certainly unsurprising in the mirror of the fact that professional skateboarding was mainly employed for marketing activities (Snyder 2017: 177).

248 For example, during my research in 2016/2017, 16-year-old street skateboarder Chappies Galant, who was known as an exceptional talent in the Capetonian scene, was already recurrently appearing in high-profile videos and magazines, and on the winner's podium of some competitions.

Ambivalent and problematic sides of (professional) skateboarding were largely concealed and romanticised in the videos, websites and magazines depicting it.

In contrast to most young skateboarders and non-skateboarders, many older skateboarders had developed a rather ambivalent or critical view regarding professional skateboarding. They had realised through observations, and their own or fellow skater's experiences that professional skateboarding was a very competitive environment in an industry exhibiting exploitative dynamics. Even for the few skaters who managed to gain a foothold in the industry's inner circle and sign sponsorship deals with well-known companies, professional skateboarding was certainly not as lucrative as it first seemed and especially not in the long term. A recurring theme in conversations with older skaters who had gained insights in the industry was their impression that many young skaters lacked the knowledge to be able to judge the glorifying portrayals in the media against reality and therefore held largely unrealistic views about career prospects as professional skaters. Michael and George, who had both been sponsored skaters until a couple years before I met them, emphasised their impression of a skewed perception in the skate scene and especially among young skaters regarding the professional sector:

Michael: Skateboarding is really institutionalised now in 2017, in the last five years it has become super institutionalised and become popular and trendy and, you can actually make money off it, people get paid, skateboarders get paid so. The skateboarders that, that, that, the new generation, the new wave of skateboarders, the only thing they know about skateboarding is seeing other skateboarders have sponsors and flying around and getting paid so. They have this illusion state of mind where like they can become rich and famous of just riding a skateboard.

George: So it's, it's all very interesting, the whole skateboarding industry to me, I like to think of it as this big illusion, like everyone thinks there is all this money and the there is like, it's not really, it is a fashion fucking business now, you know, that is how we make our money.

Developing a realistic view of the chances and prospects of a career in skateboarding coincided for some devoted skaters with the shattering of a big dream. I met quite a number of skaters who, after a few years of working hard for a professional career, discarded the dream after realising how little the chances to 'make it' and how precarious the job would actually be, like Jason:

Jason: I think I realised this [the precarious realities in professional skateboarding] a few years into skateboarding [laughing] And I think I was so like, damn, I never think I will be able to make a living. And to be honest, I think I always was really in denial

about it. 'Cause at one point I was like, ok, just face it. You never gonna be able to make a living for yourself, how you are gonna make a living? You know, I had to like talk to myself and tell myself you can't make a living from this board, how you gonna make a living? Like, am I gonna get to like Moses [Adams] level? And like is he making it? At that time he wasn't even making a decent living, you know. It's just recently that he even started dude, being able to make decent money of skateboarding. A few years ago, I mean, recently you know. And, then I was just like, fuck it, why then just stop chasing that dream and enjoy skateboarding for what it is.

Particularly in South Africa, professional skateboarding did not promise profitable earnings. In fact, even some of the sponsored skateboarders in the USA had to dedicate themselves to an ascetic lifestyle, because most earned very little and irregular income despite delivering top performances in a physically very demanding sport constantly. Without being able to exactly check these numbers, as there was barely any publicly accessible figures about the income of professional athletes, there indeed didn't seem to be much truth to the romantic image of a professional career in skateboarding:

Jason: And we as skateboarders that ride around the world think that, damn, we could also be like them [American professional skaters], and we could also be like that, but what we don't realise is that, not everybody in the states is living that dream, dude. Wes Kremer, skater of the year 2017²⁴⁹, am I right? Still lives with his parents, you know. I mean, what the fuck. Nothing wrong with living with your parents, but I mean, dude, 2017 skater of the year, Wes Kremer, still lives at home. Now you tell me, dude, Wes Kremer, ah? That guy, skate mafia, DC, like yo, golden skateboarder, skates so good, dude, like that's when I am like, damn, there is really only so much Niyah Houstons, P-Rods [Paul Rodriguez], and so much little that are making a decent living of skateboarding. There is so much of those other skaters, super AMs, and amateurs, that are really living a hustle lifestyle. Sleeping on others people's couches. And I mean you know about those as well, right? Like pros that like live together, just to like make it, you know. One is sleeping on a couch, because he has no place. Who knows, some dudes are probably staying in their cars and stuff as well.

In South Africa, too, stories circulated about professional skaters who led economically precarious lives. I heard of professional skateboarders who did not have an apartment, but stayed with friends, family or in cheap hostels, and could not afford owning a car²⁵⁰ or were struggling to pay for

249 Kremer was awarded 'Skater of the Year' by Thrasher Magazine in 2014 (Thrasher Magazine (15.12.2014): Wes Kremer Skater of the Year [website], Thrasher Magazine, online-source: <https://www.thrashermagazine.com/articles/wes-kremer-skater-of-the-year/> [accessed: 27.10.2022].

250 Spending an afternoon at a commercial indoor skatepark in Cape Town in 2020, I was quite surprised when an acclaimed professional skater pulled up on a bicycle. The somewhat peripheral park, located in an industrial area, was visited by practically no one by bicycle. Visitors usually arrived in cars or on motorbikes, very few via a nearby bus route. When asked in astonishment by another skater, the professional explained that travelling by minibus taxi

transport costs and entrance fees for competitions. Some celebrated professional athletes promoted the products of highly respected brands on high gloss paper, and their names and likenesses decorated mass-produced products sold nationally or even internationally, but they earned so little that they lived on a small budget and were still dependent on favours from family and friends. Other sponsored skaters worked simultaneously in other jobs or on other careers, or tried to supplement their income in other branches of the industry. Only few had apparently ‘made it’, they were able to completely focus on skateboarding, could earn some decent money through lucrative and steady sponsorship deals, travel the country and the world, and put some savings aside. But this seemed to be only about a handful of athletes in South Africa. Experienced skateboarder and entrepreneur Brian, who maintained very good contacts to the inner circle of the skate industry in Cape Town, underlined in a longer conversation how small the number of skaters was who received a regular payment, which in skateboarding was usually very little compared to other professionalised sports. According to Brian, a comparatively lucrative sponsorship by a well-known corporation only brought in R3000 per month, which corresponded to about 220€ or about \$200 at the time (late 2016):

Brian: There is very few, there is maybe like 5 to 10 people that actually make a living out of skateboarding in South Africa. In terms of people that just skate for a living, I think there is maybe two people and they are not well off. They are like just paying rent.

Interviewer: Like pros like [name of a highly recognised South African professional skateboarder]?

Brian: Even [name of another highly recognised South African professional skateboarder], he doesn’t have a house. [...] He doesn’t have a car.

Interviewer: Is it?

Brian: Ya, if he is in Johannesburg he stays with friends.

Interviewer: I thought he is sponsored by [international footwear corporation], right?

Brian: Yeah. How much do you think [international footwear corporation], you get paid if you skate for [international footwear corporation]?

Interviewer: I have no idea, maybe R20k, R30k a month?

or Uber was too expensive for him, let alone that he could not afford a car. Covering a few kilometres through the city on a bicycle to the indoor park was certainly inexpensive and relatively quick, but of course also time consuming and risky due to heavy traffic and the high crime rate. This situation highlighted how little some of the professionals actually earned, but also how down-to-earth many professional skaters lived.

Brian: 20, 30?

Interviewer: Ya.

Brian: Try R3000 a month.

Interviewer: Really?

Brian: If you skate for [international footwear corporation] in South Africa you get paid R3000 a month and they are the only shoe company that pays their sponsors.

Interviewer: Oh, ok, oh wow, ok. That's not a lot of money, not at all.

Brian: No one else on any other shoe company gets paid at all, you just get product. You get given the product. And if you get paid it is usually if you get a photo in a magazine like Session, your sponsor will pay you because of your coverage and that's only [international footwear corporation] and [another international footwear corporation]. No other brand pays you for coverage. So that's why people think you can make a career out of skateboarding, but there is no money.

The income of professional skateboarders in the USA and Europe was comparatively much better, especially as the skateboarding industry was larger and more profitable there than in South Africa. This did not mean that this sector was not also precarious and highly competitive in the context of these societies. But for a much larger number of skaters who had 'made it' a professional career at least promised a decent income. According to Snyder, professional skateboarders in America earned between \$5000 and \$40000 per month, top professionals received between \$100,000 and well over \$1 million a year. Moreover, US-American "top companies provide[d] their riders with health care and benefits" (Snyder 2012: 321).²⁵¹ Due to the larger size of the American skate industry, there were certainly more opportunities for employment in the industry after 'retirement' from professional skateboarding. A professional career could therefore lay the foundations for sustainable employment there. Similar to many other parts of the economy in the former European colonies on the African continent, working conditions in the skateboarding sector were significantly worse and highly precarious compared to those in the West (cf. Mabasa 2022: 235). The generally weak state of the South African economy exacerbated the precarious realities. For a highly commercialised subculture dependent on imports a weak economy was a serious problem. Investments in the

²⁵¹ However, many companies did not provide health insurance or other social benefits to sponsored skaters because they only employed them as freelancers, not as employees. Many US pro skaters had to insure themselves accordingly. Those who did not earn enough in the professional business simply rode without health insurance (Browning, Ian (23.06.2017): How do professional skaters deal with health insurance?, Jenkem Magazine, online-source: <https://www.jenkemmag.com/home/2017/06/23/affordable-care-acts-effect-skateboard-industry> [accessed: 15.11.2018]).

marketing sector were relatively little when the general economic situation was worsening and the potential consumer base was small, which unavoidably had an impact on the professional sector that was largely creating turnover by producing advertisements (Snyder 2017: 177). Within the rather small scene existed a larger number of talented skaters competing over few sponsoring opportunities, which led to a high degree of competitiveness and weak earnings for athletes in the industry. Many skaters in South Africa were happy to get at least some form of support from one of the few potential sponsors. To get any form of sponsorship at all was often regarded a privilege within the scene. Companies and corporates did not seem to hesitate to use this situation in their favour.

The relationship between professional skateboarders and sponsoring companies can fundamentally be conceptualised as one between workers and capitalists (cf. Budd 2001: 10; Flint/Eitzen 1987: 17). In this relationship, company owners aim to employ athletes to advertise products which may be more or less skate related. The professional skaters sell their labour, which' value is mainly based on skills they have acquired over the years. Similar to professional athletes in other sports, professional skateboarders act as brand ambassadors, and increase the visibility and perceived value of particular products to boost the profitability of the sponsors commercial activities. As compensation for their efforts, sponsored skaters receive monetary and material support, for example, in the form of payment, gear, clothing, covered costs for travelling and event participation (Snyder 2012: 310; Snyder 2017: 173). While the resources obtained by the skaters in the transaction are quite tangible, this is not necessarily the case with regard to the economical gains obtained by the sponsoring companies. The (additional) profits generated via marketing for a sponsor can generally hardly be determined precisely. Certainly, though, from the generated profits professional athletes usually received only a tiny fraction. The pro skateboarder and entrepreneur Zane Foley had summed up this relationship succinctly:

“You might think because you’ve spent decades watching skate videos, buying skate clothes and checking your favorite websites daily that you’re an expert on skateboarding. Sure, you know the spots, the tricks, the skaters, the brands, and the videos, shit even the photographers and filmers; but you really have no idea the driving incentives behind projects, teams, and products. This is especially true in terms of the skateboarder and brand represented by any ad, media coverage or video. There’s a lot more numbers and dollar signs behind skate media than you might imagine, and most of those are not going to the skateboarder.”²⁵²

252 Foley, Zane (22.03.2017): What You’ll learn from Working in the Skateboarding Industry, LinkedIn, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/what-youll-learn-from-working-skateboarding-industry-zane-foley?trk=portfolio_article-card_title [accessed: 23.07.2019].

For people with insights into the skateboarding industry, such dynamics were rather obvious when athletes in some cases advertised the products of international brands making enormous profits, but were merely paid paltry wages and did not receive any long term securities. The working relationship between sponsors and athletes could accordingly raise questions over underpayment and exploitation. An exemplary case of this in American skateboarding was the story around ex-professional Anthony Pappalardo, who made public how his signature shoe had been marketed by a company for years without him being employed or paid adequately.²⁵³

The skateboarding industry had developed its own traditional forms of working relationships that could be more or less formal. In South Africa, a small number of professionals was ‘on contract’ and received a monthly salary, and was furthermore able to supplement their income through media coverage, advertising productions and prize money from competitions. These top-professionals invested large parts of their free and working time in active skating and skateboarding related activities. They embodied the dream of every ambitious skater to comprehensively immerse themselves in the sport and subculture. A much larger number of skilled amateurs were not on any form of contract, but received money, free gear and other forms of support from sponsors at irregular intervals. These skaters often made a living through or supplemented their skateboarding income with other jobs, ideally within the skateboarding industry. Yet, for unemployed skaters sponsorships could be quite valuable or even essential to continue engaging in the sport. Occasionally, skilled skateboarders could find additional income opportunities outside of the skate industry that were still related to the activity (cf. Snyder 2017: 179). For example, some skateboarders in Cape Town were now and then employed as actors in the film industry or found employment as (skateboarding) models for fashion labels, other skaters could use their skills and experiences in media production in the flourishing creative industry. Other skateboarders founded or worked in skateboard NGOs and in this way tried to acquire funds from the private sector or the state through sport related forms of social work.

The vast majority of sponsored skateboarders did not receive monetary compensation at all, but was on ‘flow’. Flow boiled down to products given for free or offered for a discount to sponsored skateboarders, mostly in the form of equipment, clothing and shoes (cf. Snyder 2012: 320) which athletes received at irregular intervals, sent by post or handed over personally. This was primarily understood to compensate for the wear of the skateboarders’ gear and make the athlete’s life ‘a bit easier’. For example, shoe companies offered sponsored skaters free shoes, but the sponsored athletes still paid all other resulting expenses themselves or would receive other products from other

253 48Blocks (n.d.): Anthony Pappalardo | 2012, 48Blocks, online-source: <https://48blocks.com/anthony-pappalardo/> [accessed: 23.11.2021].

sponsors. The intervals in which athletes received products were often not specifically agreed upon and sponsored skaters I met often received products irregularly.²⁵⁴ Flow was therefore a very loose, informal sponsoring relationship between companies and skaters that did not involve any future obligations. Generally, much in the skateboarding industry was practically transacted on a project and incentive basis, so riders were rewarded for example for contest wins, photos in established magazines or other forms of public promotion of the sponsor's products.

I was surprised that among the street skaters I met, numerous were involved with flow deals in some way. In the era of social media, flow had become a very influential form of sponsoring: Because everyone could potentially become a brand ambassador with self-produced material and sponsorships could be offered in a particularly fine-tuned manner. Flow was an excellent way to offer skaters one-off or short-term product donations for successful contributions or a momentarily good public presence. For companies, flow was a relatively inexpensive marketing practice, and also quite convenient and risk-free, as no obligations were involved. Accordingly, there were even some small entrepreneurs who had skaters on flow for local marketing. Brandon, owner of a tiny clothing business in Cape Town, had a few young amateur skateboarders on flow, whom he met regularly when skating in the local park. In our interview he emphasised that the requirement for a flow deal was that the skateboarders had to create social media content to advertise the clothes he produced and sold. His remarks demonstrated how flow could be used as a sponsoring tool in a very small-scale and flexible manner. Thanks to social media and the availability of smartphones, even young amateur skateboarders were capable of producing good-looking and 'authentic' audiovisual material continuously on their own that could be used for advertisement:

Brandon: I was like, yo guys, just skate more and become, and, or like, just do something, you know, and then you get some shit, you know. And put yourself out there. I can't just give stuff, if you are not skating. When I look back at it now, I don't see anything wrong with that, as well. Because the guys that were getting stuff were already, were guys putting themselves on the line all the time. You know, they were like really to be, like learn new tricks and I was like 'yo, man, that to me is like super 100% like raw crushing style of skating', you know. But I saw that even that wasn't working for me. So quickly I had to think about something else. And I stopped giving those guys stuff, because they couldn't, they weren't, they couldn't understand what I was trying to tell them. They weren't stepping up and they couldn't, they didn't want to do social media stuff. And I was like wow, opening the door, throwing my t-shirts in and closing it, it's the same, you know. And I sat down with one of the guys that skated with me in a skate

²⁵⁴ In some cases, young skaters in particular got involved with flow sponsorship without seeing through the exact conditions of the loose agreement. For example, a young student from Kenya, who was a very talented street skater and spent a few years in Cape Town, proudly told me that he had signed a sponsorship deal with a shoe manufacturer. But when I asked him how much and how often he was sent products, he could not provide an answer because there was no clear agreement between the sponsor and him.

comp. And I told him my idea, I said 'make a list of skateboarders in the park that skate. But list the guys that have a social media presence. And a strong presence. They don't have to be the best skateboarders. I am gonna make a shitload of samples and we are gonna give those guys all of those samples. And what we want in return is, just to be tagged, just to be upped in the pictures and stuff, just mention us, just tag us, that's it. And if things go well, cool, we give them stuff again.' And that was one of the best decisions ever, because it sorted that guy. Nobody knows how good they skate. And what these guys show on social media, people believe, you know what I mean? [...] And I mean these were guys that had like thousands of followers, and people don't even know how good they skate. Some of these guys don't even skate good, I must be honest. But, you know.

Interviewer: They let it look good.

Jason: They let it look good. [...] But I also tell them, whenever the brand gets to a point where we can make money and pay you guys, cool. But for now, well, we can just give you samples, we just give you samples. And in return you just add us, you know, it's like that simple. Free stuff for shares.

For many aspiring skaters flow was the first form of payment they received from players in the skate industry and thus constituted the lowest level of the career ladder. Especially young skateboarders seemed eager to act as advertisers of products in photos and videos and at events for companies, only being compensated through occasional product donations and the opportunity to appear in commercial media. And without a doubt, it fuelled the pride and ambitions of young skaters when they were sponsored by recognised companies and brands, or got invited to skate with celebrated professionals. Pierre, a skater in his early 20s, for example, explained to me that the offer of a flow deal triggered a considerable motivation boost in him:

Pierre: [...] about three, four years ago the scene in Cape Town started picking up again. Then I started pushing hard at vert skating and mini ramp skating. And then slowly things started picking up. The scene started open up a lot more, I started to make a lot more friends in the skating industry. And then about two years ago I decided to really start like going hard with skateboarding. And then about a year ago I picked up my first sponsorship, it wasn't like an official sponsorship. It was just a local board shop agreeing to give me boards.

Interviewer: I see.

Pierre: And that really motivated me, and from that point I was like, I am gonna put at least minimum three hours of skating a day and since then skating has really opened up to me.

Some companies did seem to put young, talented skateboarders on flow to ‘keep them warm’ and suggest further sponsoring opportunities or ‘turn them pro’ later on (cf. Synder 2012: 320; Snyder 2017: 153). However, such promises were to be taken with caution in the dynamic and precarious industry. Even more so than in the context of more formal sponsorship relationships, potential exploitative dynamics came into play in flow. This circumstance was, in my view, particularly relevant and potentially problematic in the South African context, as sometimes very young skaters from poor households were involved in flow deals with usually much older and wealthier skateboarding entrepreneurs. Young skaters, especially when coming from poor households, were often rather easy to impress with flow deals, and, in a sense, provided companies with a lot of ‘bang for the buck’. In addition to the acknowledgement expressed with flow, product giveaways in the form of shoes, clothing or equipment were of no small perceived value for children²⁵⁵, youth and especially for poor skaters. Deluded by the received brand new products and opportunity to appear in media distributed by the sponsor, and with little knowledge of and experience in the general labour world and skateboarding industry, young skaters could often not tell whether the transactions they were getting into with a flow deal were actually fair.²⁵⁶ Some skaters, like David, who was friends with a talented young skater, felt that flow deals with young people could take on an exploitative character:

David: So they give him [young, talented skater] shoes, to keep him there. They are not trying to help you, because it, it’s a very sick. [...] He doesn’t understand what we, he doesn’t understand what we were talking about. He is a kid, he is 17 bra, he doesn’t understand, he doesn’t understand the controversy. He sees those guys [the skateboarding business men] and he still looks at them ‘yeah, they are helping me’, no bro! They are using you, bro! He doesn’t see it. He is a kid, all he wants to do is ride a skateboard. He woke up this morning before everyone and got to the skatepark.

Many skaters had to make their own experiences first, enabling them to distinguish good from bad deals in the long-term. Yusuf, who had been quite successful as a pro-skater in the 2000s, told me

255 Flow made it possible to sponsor very young skaters who, by law, were not yet allowed to engage in paid work (in South Africa, children under the age of 15). Sponsoring children was also not uncommon in western skateboarding, where it was likewise practised through flow.

256 In Cape Town, for example, I observed how an established filmer working in the industry courted a teenage skateboarder from a poor family, invited him to film shoots, provided him with occasional flow and introduced him to the top skateboarders in town. Some of his older acquaintances, some of whom had had experiences with the industry themselves, viewed this with concern, as they had the impression that the boy was being used. While the young one received a pair of shoes and little favours every now and then, and was easily impressed when being invited to skate, film and hang out with other sponsored skaters, the brand manager got excellent marketing material as the young talent was known for his technically impressive, risky skateboarding. The question of exploitation was raised here for some skaters.

about latently exploitative early sponsoring experiences and how he had to learn how to negotiate for better deals. He was able to find steady employment outside the skateboarding industry after his professional career, but was still 'on flow' when I met him in his early 40s. Some companies secured the long-term 'loyalty' of well-known, former professional athletes through flow, who thus continued to promote their products even though they were no longer active professional skateboarders, yet still played a role in the skate scene in one way or the other:

Yusuf: I got to the point where, you know, initially all I wanted to do is to become professional, or to be sponsored and I became that. And then I was still working and I couldn't afford my products and these people were telling me I must be at this competition, I must do this, I must be there, you know, I must get a cover shot in a magazine. And you know what these are things that I would do anyway, if they didn't tell me.

Interviewer: I see.

Yusuf: Because I love skateboarding. [...] So then what I did was I told them, well thank you very much for your support, I appreciate it but I can't afford my own products, I mean you guys only give me product, you don't give me money. I got lots of products, but it didn't amount to the demand they were putting on me. [...] Two of my sponsors were like, look here, you do what you normally do. However you wanna do it, it's up to you. We are gonna give you some products, you don't gonna have to. [...] And that is when I realised, ok, these guys are here for me. And then I stay with them [...] I haven't bought shoes in 15, 20 years. You know. So they all give me shoes because they know that I am always out there skateboarding and the youngsters will see me skateboarding in [shoes of a popular brand].

So while companies profited from talented skateboarders to advertise through media and as real-life brand-ambassadors to increase the sales of a significant, yet hardly exactly determinable number of products, many athletes only got a few pair of shoes, a couple decks or a set of wheels in return now and then (cf. Peters 2016: 206). This seemed astonishing to me in the mirror of the risks faced and resources mobilised by skateboarders in order to produce compelling media material for the sponsors. The standard in professional skateboarding had risen to such an extent that the focus was placed more and more on risky manoeuvres such as grinding long, steep railings, jumping over high stair sets and long gaps, and performing tricks in unforgiving architectural environments (Peters 2016: 203). Snyder had pinpointed the resulting risks in his work on professional skaters in the USA:

“As skateboarding has evolved and progressed, the amount of risk that skaters take on has become difficult to comprehend, especially since most skate videos are a showcase of successful makes; for the most part they do not show the painful process. As riders attempt more and more difficult tricks on bigger obstacles, the amount of falling and pain and dedication involved is staggering, and truthfully it’s difficult to watch on video, let alone witness firsthand.” (Snyder 2017: 46)

Many skaters justified the precarious working conditions for themselves by saying that they would skateboard anyway, with or without being sponsored. High injury risks and suffering occasional injuries were regarded a legitimate part of the game of professional skateboarding. That, in consequence, boys and young men could ruin their bodies in the process was ironically summed up in an article in *Session Magazine*: “How do you get sponsored? You destroy your body for a very long time then eventually someone will notice you and it’s on” (*Session 50 2012*: 20). Yet, heavy falls could quickly end careers and few bodies could endure the high physical stress from skateboarding on a professional level in the long term. Careers often only lasted a few years (Snyder 2017: 15; cf. Mullen/Mortimer 2004: 254). There was hardly a long-term perspective for professional skateboarders, as sooner or later their physical capabilities would dwindle and new talents would rise. Even contracted professional skateboarders were usually not protected against these short- and long-term occupational risks by the industry. Employment contracts were generally time-limited or project-based. This was not peculiar to the South African sector, but was also not unknown in the ‘motherland’ of the sport, the USA (cf. Snyder 2012: 324, 326). Professional athletes, in other words, bore the occupational risks individually, although they engaged in a rather risky form of sportive work used for marketing purposes by companies. If they suffered acute or chronic injuries during training or photo and film shootings that made skateboarding impossible, they were simply not employed any further. Brian summed up this issue in an interview:

Brian: It’s like people in South Africa get opportunities a lot [regarding skateboarding]. But how sustainable is it in terms of making a career, long-term growth? Moses [Adams] and Dlamini [Dlamini] they get some money for skateboarding, they get opportunities to travel to the States, they go to Street League in Barcelona in Europe. But when they come back to South Africa, what have they actually got? Moses is making a career in terms of [large corporate sponsor] are paying him a salary. But if [large corporate sponsor] cuts that salary tomorrow how sustainable is his career. Is there another brand that is gonna step in place and say ‘oh [large corporate sponsor] is not paying you, we are paying you the same amount’?. I don’t know if there is. He has got one opportunity with them and if that falls apart, you know what I mean.

Interviewer: That’s basically, it’s a high risk environment.

Brian: [Interrupting] And it's a young-man's-game because if you break your foot tomorrow and you can't skate, who is gonna pay you to skate? It's done.

Companies seemed not hesitant when it came to replacing professional skaters and aspirants as soon as they could not (any longer) deliver the performance they had been employed for. A similarly radical, performance-oriented logic was at work in professional skateboarding as in other professional sports: those who delivered physical peak performance could hope for employment opportunities and public recognition, those who did not (anymore) were quickly out of the game and usually just quietly disappeared from the public stage. Having made this experience himself a few years before, Michael's perception of professional skateboarding had changed accordingly:

Michael: You don't make money off the tricks you do on a skateboard. That is not how you make your money, because you still skateboarding for the person that owns DC, or the people that own KFD, that's a South African company, KFD or Revolution, or you skate for Baseline. You skate for all these companies, you know, they help you along, you are doing cool tricks, but they can terminate your contract tomorrow and then you know it. And it's gonna happen because you only have that lifespan as a skateboarder.

In skateboarding, while it was not uncommon for newly sponsored riders to be 'welcomed' by companies (for example, by a video introducing them to the public or a celebrated release of a branded product), retiring riders were most seldom 'farewelled'. A continuous coming and going of athletes celebrated in the commercial media was the visible, yet glorified expression of the tough realities in the professional sector.²⁵⁷ Unsurprisingly, I encountered several stories about failed careers of professional athletes in the field that had occasionally been told to me with bitterness, anger and deep disappointment. For some dedicated skateboarders it seemed to have created an identity crisis to discover and experience the realities of professional skateboarding, where talent, performance and self-discipline, and devotion and dedication to skateboarding were not valued in the way the subcultural ethos and skateboarding media promised. Some skaters felt exploited after being courted for some time by sponsors, but then being uncompromisingly put on the street because of a drop in performance due to injury or replacement by another skateboarder with a higher marketing value. Samuel had observed, for example, how the sudden loss of a sponsorship after an injury had thrown his skater friend Michael into a crisis:

²⁵⁷ Pappalardo, Anthony (27.12.2019): Skateboarding is not progressive: poking holes in perception, Artless, online-source: <https://anthonypappalardo.substack.com/p/skateboarding-is-not-progressive> [accessed: 15.11.2022].

Samuel: We just need some change here. The laities, that their own dreams can become true, because when you do some skating for these companies and stuff like, you are jumping down and whatever. Now you hurt yourself, now you don't have medical aid to sort it out, you are shooting an advert, the thing, for a company, but they don't pay him. What happened to Michael? He was at [popular skateboarding company], but then he got a knee injury.

Interviewer: Oh, ok.

Samuel: He was the best skater, at one point fucking mad shit, like besides Moses Adams he was like the best Flats laaiti. Full on sponsored by them, fucking heavy. Then the knee injury happened, couple months later he lost the package, his whole life, he had a [popular skateboarding company] look, he was very, very good, until this knee injury. This guy is like fucked now, he had a demotivator of unbelievable extent.

Some skateboarders had been through many years of disciplined, hard training and may have focused much of their lives on becoming outstanding skateboarders, dreaming to once ride under the labels of renowned companies. But instead of gaining recognition from the big players in the business, which in itself was reserved for only a tiny elite, they felt that they were treated as exchangeable workers who were dismissed at the slightest loss of value. For companies, sponsoring was profitable precisely because the majority of the reproduction costs of professional skateboarders were externalised, borne by themselves. This concerned not only the costs during the time when skaters actually worked as professional athletes, but also the costs incurred by skaters in previous years to develop the skills enabling them to do so. Only after skateboarders had invested extensive amounts of time, money and dedication, companies were 'harvesting' the talents they had not made any previous contribution and commitment to (cf. Peters 2016: 207; Snyder 2012: 326). Compared to many mainstream sports, there was no organised youth development that was not profit-oriented in skateboarding.²⁵⁸ At the same time, the skateboarding industry did not seem to have any sense of responsibility for the fate of most professional skaters who left the world of professional riding due to age or health problems. Pro-skaters were responsible for their own fate in

258 On an informal level, forms of mentoring existed and some activists gave skateboarding courses for children and young people, but usually in a small and often not very long-term format. In a way, some skate NGOs were practising some form of youth development by providing equipment, facilities and workshops. Many of these NGOs were at least partly sponsored by skateboard companies, which meant that they put at least part of their profits (or tax levies) into youth development. However, the NGO sector was not only very small, but above all unstable. The mostly small social enterprises often had a short life span, projects came and went, continuous development was seldom happening. In addition, even NGO projects, especially when they were aimed at marginalised children and young people, were at least partly used for marketing purposes. Depending on how strong the marketing intention of NGOs was, the answer to the question of who benefits from whom here could be quite difficult to answer. In some cases I encountered, children and young people who took part in the skateboarding workshops and were thus also made available for photo and film shoots by NGO staff seemed to take on a similar role as sponsored skaters in the professional business.

the long-term, no support was to be expected from skate companies when they had to end their careers.

5.3.6 Building a reputation in the skateboarding industry

As mentioned before, some skaters distanced themselves from the industry after realising the latently exploitative conditions. Yet, quite a share of skateboarders, even many who had already gained insight into the backstages of the industry, was still holding professional skateboarding in high regard and keen to enter sponsoring relationships with companies. In general, it seemed astonishing to me how quite a number of skaters took the practices in the skateboarding industry for granted or defended them. There were a few reasons for this, but the strong commercialisation of skateboarding and neoliberal aspects of skateboarding culture seemed particularly relevant to me.

Longing for economic income or product donations was not necessarily the main driver for most skateboarders to get involved in sponsorship deals with the skateboarding industry. Rather, due to the subcultural ethos described earlier, association with certain brands and companies generated prestige in the scene and subcultural economy. Companies offered athletes not only economic but also symbolic capital in the Bourdieuan sense (Weiß 2010: 42) that generated recognition in the skateboarding scene (and, to a degree, in the wider society) (cf. Dupont 2014: 10; Schäfer 2020: 219, 227). Appearing in well-produced marketing media of particular companies promised a status gain in the scene and increased the chances to obtain more lucrative deals in the future. Signature shoes and decks were particularly valuable in this respect. As Peters put it in his dissertation, receiving a signature deck from a recognised company corresponded to a crowning in the world of skateboarding (Peters 2016: 206; cf. Snyder 2012: 320f.). George, a former professional skateboarder and entrepreneur, emphasised the relevance of a signature deck in an interview. From his experiences, professional skateboarders would even work for free for (the right) companies to receive a signature deck, because it would raise their subcultural status and potentially open further sponsoring opportunities in the future:

George: Ya, because like I mean who your ride for is super important, a case in point like, a lot of pros in America don't get paid by the board brand.

Interviewer: Ok.

George: Even if they should, but they all go to like a board company 'hey, I just need a fucking model out, I don't care if you don't pay me', because without that pro-model

you are not getting a shoe deal²⁵⁹, you are not getting a bunch of things, so that thing is super important.

Interviewer: So it's kind of a door opener?

George: So to to like, the thumbs up when you got your name on a board in America, so then from that point, even if you are not getting paid and the company is making money off your board, but it helps going renegotiate your contract with Vans.

Interviewer: I see.

George: Whatever, ok, I got a pro-model, you know.

In the world of skateboarding, signature products resembled an objectified form of cultural and symbolic capital, similar to educational titles as framed by Bourdieu (1983: 185). They were the materialised proof of the status of a skateboarder. In this regard, the commercial sector in skateboarding maintained the unwritten right to grant awards and honours to individual athletes that were recognised by skateboarders worldwide. This was the reason why some skaters were pursuing exploitative sponsorship deals on an economic level, as the gain consisted not only of economic capital. The deep commercialisation and the perception of certain commercial actors as subcultural authorities put companies in a very powerful position in skateboarding culture, allowing them to define the latently exploitative rules of the game. My impression that companies considered authentic by skaters in particular could easily involve skaters in exploitative sponsorship deals was summed up by professional skater Dale Decker, who stated that for skateboarders “[i]t is ok to be exploited as long as it is by a skateboard company”²⁶⁰.

Moreover, precarious employment in the skate industry and in the context of sponsored skateboarding tended to be romanticised and accepted as ‘subcultural hustle’ in the scene (cf. Peters 2016: 208). I encountered this aspect quite strikingly in an issue of blunt magazine from 2003. An interview with then professional skater Whandile Zulu seemed to exemplify how skateboarders tended to individualise employment risks and high workload, and accept them as a matter of course or regard them as just an element of the skateboarding game. Up-and-coming young skater Zulu had been given a signature deck by the South African company Viking, was celebrated in blunt

259 According to George, board deals tended to bring in very little money. Lucrative income for skaters was mainly to be made through shoe sponsors. The reason for this would be that the shoe market is much bigger and more lucrative. Decks are sold to a relatively small group of active skaters, while skate shoes are also worn by non-skaters and are thus sold to a much larger consumer base.

260 Dale Decker (01.08.2021): How the Skateboarding Industry Exploits Skaters [video], Youtube, online-source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=0sy-GvZETEC> [accessed:24.03.2022].

magazine as South Africa's first, Black professional skater, but was also under high pressure to generate enough attention so that his signature product sold well, as he explained:

“[Interviewer:] Onto more positive things, apparently your board is the best seller of the Viking range?”

[Zulu:] {Laughs} Unfortunately, ‘cos now I have to get more coverage; that’s the only way my board is going to sell. I’ve got to make sure I don’t miss tours, go on the road. If sales fall, I’ll be kicked off the team.

[Interviewer:] So you are feeling a bit of pressure then?

[Zulu:] Well, it’s more a responsibility, ‘cos I’m contracted. The pressure is not a deadline pressure, but a pressure to yourself. But I want to do it, it’s all part of my skating.” (blunt 7/4 2003: 34)

Unfortunately, Zulu disappeared from the scene and Viking withdrew from the market a few months later, which underlined the instability of the professional skateboarding sector. Similar to Zulu, many subcultural labourers and entrepreneurs tended to downplay or glorify the precarious realities in the industry as a valued or essential part of a skateboarding lifestyle (cf. Schweer 2014: 164; Snyder 2012: 326). In a sense, professional skaters were largely understood as self-employed, small-scale entrepreneurs in a high-risk market. I recurrently encountered the picture of skateboarders being independent, small-scale entrepreneurs in conversations and interviews. Frankie summed up his impression of the entrepreneurial aspect of skateboarding culture with the following words:

Frankie: That’s like entrepreneurship, and like you will see, almost every skater that’s in, any skater that’s there is not employed in formal employment. Like everyone is hustling. Hustling is the basis of entrepreneurship and skateboarding teaches you the foundations for that. It teaches you how to carry the backpack with the grip tape and sell it kinda thing. And keep you kinda going. It also teaches you how to fall and get up, so it builds like resilience and stuff. You know, that kinda stuff. So it gives you good foundations for entrepreneurship.

Such statements seemed to align with other writers’ descriptions of skateboarding subculture as permeated by neoliberal ideology (Dinces 2011: 1514; Howell 2005: 35; Howell 2008: 476; Schweer 2014: 165ff.; Snyder 2012: 326; Wheaton 2013: 5). The professional skater represented in a radical form the flexible, highly motivated, self-optimising, creative and risk-taking small-scale

entrepreneur confidently asserting him- or herself in an very dynamic, fast-paced market environment, without batting an eyelid and bearing all the risks him- or herself (cf. Reihling 2020: 80). Furthermore, the entrepreneurial approach seemed to fruitfully interplay with the performance and production of masculinity in skateboarding. In a sense, being a recognised male skateboarder did not only require taking and managing risky physical practices in at times risky urban public spaces, but also taking and managing risks in an unstable, precarious economic environment. Since the skateboarding industry was even more male dominated as wider scene itself²⁶¹, this added another dimension to the ‘serious game over masculinity’, in which boys and men competed over the economic and symbolic capital in a competitive market (cf. Beal/Wilson 2004: 35f.; Borden 2019: 50; Bourdieu 1998: 36ff.; cf. Connell 2005: 35f.; Holborow 2015: 82). In this vein, valued skateboarding masculinity involved economic ratio, competitiveness and success (cf. Connell 1987: 106; Connell 2005: 189; Reihling 2020: 31). As Atencio, Beal and Yochim (2013: 157) pointed out, a glorified image of the ‘self-made men’ circulated in skateboarding culture.

Depending on their class background, skaters participated on the economic playfield with different opportunities and intentions. As previously outlined, the fact that some entered the economy as owners of capital and others as ‘workers’ was a fundamentally structuring factor for the reproduction of class relations within the subcultural economy and, due to their close entanglement, general sport and subculture of skateboarding. While for some, work in the skateboarding industry was linked to real hopes for an income and, at the same time, real existential risks, for skaters from privileged class backgrounds economic aspirations could almost completely recede into the background, and work in the industry could predominantly serve the development of a subcultural status and the ability to engage in a subcultural lifestyle. This was the case, for example, when skaters from wealthy backgrounds tried to build a skate brand or take over a skate shop with little prospect of profit, or engaged in specific working class jobs, for example as shopping clerks in skate shops or as cashiers in skateparks, despite having opportunities in much more lucrative economic spheres. In such jobs, the focus was often less on economic gains than on the idea of self-realisation and acquisition of subcultural capital, which could particularly effectively be obtained through (visible) work in prestigious spheres of the industry. By far the greatest recognition, of course, came from being a professional skateboarder.

The voluntary work in low-paid jobs was understood by some skaters as proof of the passionate devotion to skateboarding as a culture, who thus more or less implicitly aimed to distinguish

261 In fact, among the business owners and managers, and workers in the South African skateboarding industry I did not meet a single women. The only exception was a single-digit number of women who were working in various positions in skateboard NGOs.

themselves from actors who were in the industry 'just for the money'. In this subcultural economic game, those who brought the least dependence on meagre economic gains were obviously at an advantage, and the subcultural economy remained largely a playing field for class privileged skateboarders. In the South African context, this also entailed that the industry was in the hands of White South Africans and internationals, while skateboarders of colour were structurally and quite practically excluded from lucrative positions in the economy. In this respect, a key issue of macroeconomic developments in the country was replicated within the skateboarding industry and subcultural economy (Malukele 2019: 149; Mbembe 2008: 12; Seekings 2011: 29; Terreblanche 2002: 423).

All this does not mean that skateboarders in general pursued commercial motives or were uncritical of the happenings in the skateboarding industry. The majority of skateboarders devoted themselves to the sport and subculture informally and without commercial intentions. A considerable share of skateboarders viewed the skateboarding industry with scepticism and some turned their backs to the skateboarding industry altogether. Especially those skaters who had made experiences in the industry themselves often held an ambivalent view of the sport's commercial sector, which represented an important pillar of skateboarding as a practice and culture, but was recognised as being deeply affected by the socio-economic inequalities of the wider society. Some skaters tried to counteract exclusionary tendencies in the commercial sphere by founding their own companies, brands and NGOs, opening up the commercialised game and thus granting a larger number and wider spectrum of skateboarders opportunities to gain recognition. However, this did not change the fundamental ideological underpinning of skateboarding with the defining, recognised role of commercial players, the appreciation of entrepreneurial values and success, and the resultant impacts on the sport and subculture. In this respect, South African skateboarding upheld the ideal of economic advancement through disciplined, creative and dedicated work (on the self). In the mirror of the sober realities, however, the larger societal drama of the disappointed hopes of economic advancement and the reproduction of racialised class inequalities played out in and around the subcultural economy.

6 Conclusion

With this thesis I have aimed to conduct an intersectional analysis of and explore the relevance of gender, race and class in South African skateboarding. Picking up discourses and debates around a supposed socially integrative and ‘empowering’ effect of skateboarding (and sports in the wider sense) (cf. Besnier/Brownell/Carter 2017: 117; Borden 2019: 29; Coalter 2007: 18f.), I investigated the social realities of South African street skateboarding with historiographic and ethnographic methods, with fieldwork being conducted in Cape Town and Johannesburg over a total of 14 months. The aim of the research endeavour was to capture in detail the practical experiential spaces of the sport and subculture of skateboarding with a focus on gender, race and class relations, and to understand it in the context of its social historical development and in its embeddedness in the broader societal context. Theoretically and methodologically, reflexive anthropology conceptualised by Bourdieu and Wacquant (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1996) and Wacquant’s carnal sociology (Garcia/Spencer 2013: 4ff.; Wacquant 2013: 28) provided important theoretical and methodological pillars for this endeavour. In the mirror of research approaches engaging with sports, lifestyle sports and subcultures like skateboarding, whose data basis consisted of short-term, passive observations, interviews and secondary data, which not only excluded the practical realities, but also the historical dimension as well as the dimension of the broader political and economic conditions in society, and which barely paid attention to the perspectives and voices of skaters of marginalised race and class positions (cf. Williams 2020), it became clear that a concerted employment of reflexive anthropology and carnal sociology could provide a promising methodological approach to fill the gaps. Especially when the focus is put on a highly commercialised sport and subculture permeated by marketing discourses, the critical questioning and informed exploration of the social realities in peculiar contexts and on the ‘backstages’ turned out to be indispensable. Thus, I hope that this thesis can not only offer productive insights into the social realities of South African skateboarding, but also inspiration regarding potential methodological approaches for the future investigation of sports, subcultures and urban youth cultures.

The illumination of skateboarding’s historical development in South Africa uncovered that it underwent a fundamentally similar development as skateboarding in the USA and Western Europe, but that its development also took a distinct trajectory in the context of a society impacted by European colonialism and apartheid. In the 1960s, the skateboard had been carried from the American west coast to the southern tip of the African continent and was used for sidewalk surfing. From an activity closely connected to surfing and beach culture, skateboarding moved from the beaches to private and commercial skateparks with the rise of vert skateboarding in the 1970s and

1980s. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, it shed ties to the surfing world with street skateboarding, moved into the inner cities and was increasingly regarded as being part of urban youth and street cultures. This development was accompanied by a remarkable demographic shift in skateboarding. During apartheid, skateboarding was deeply entangled in the segregated realities and popular largely among class privileged White South Africans who had access to the necessary resources to engage in the activity. Due to the close connection to surfing, which had been a White dominated activity not only in South Africa, but also in the United States, the exclusion of the majority was fostered since the early days of the sport. Both sidewalk surfing and vert skateboarding were spatially and infrastructurally embedded in the privileged spheres of the apartheid society. While sidewalk surfing was performed in the vicinity of the beaches excluding the non-White majority under apartheid, vert skateboarding required access to costly facilities such as ramps and skateparks that were located in White group areas. Consequently, only a tiny number of skaters were to be found among South Africans of colour during apartheid. With the rise of street skateboarding and the opening up of South African urban spaces with the transformation to democracy, skateboarding became generally much more accessible. The rise of street skateboarding in South Africa fruitfully played together with the fall of the apartheid regime and transformation to democracy. Skateboarding was undergoing visible demographic changes since the late 1990s and in the course of the 2000s, and the race and class diversity of South African skateboarding significantly increased.

Although the share of skaters of colour had massively increased in the past decades, skateboarding's demography remained skewed. That the country's majority often lacked the resources necessary to engage in the relatively costly sport had not changed until the recent past. In a society where a significant share of the population lived under poor infrastructural conditions and in severe poverty (Sulla/Zikhali 2018: xviii), there were tangible reasons why skateboarding had not even come close to matching the popularity of accessible mainstream and team sports like football, rugby and cricket. Even though skateboarding's demography had diversified considerably, the racialised class inequalities of the wider society ensured that the sport still exhibited a visible overrepresentation of White and middle class skaters, and an underrepresentation of skaters of colour and of a working class background in the late 2010s and early 2020s (cf. Abraham 2017: 105). Consequently, skateboarding was considered by many South Africans to be a middle class activity, and therefore sometimes still associated with whiteness in a racialised class society.

With the growing social diversity among skaters, race and class inequalities became increasingly visible within skateboarding. Skaters from different class backgrounds participated in the sport with

often very different opportunities and freedoms. Athletes from privileged class backgrounds enjoyed considerable advantages regarding access to equipment, spaces, facilities and mobility. Lower class skaters, on the other hand, often struggled with engaging in the practice at all and had to overcome various additional challenges. As I have illuminated, particularly the class position determined the opportunities for skaters to excel on the board and interact with the wider scene. As class still tended to overlap with racialised positions in the South African society, the (re)production of class inequalities was linked to or appeared as the (re)production of racialised inequalities (Bond 2004: 47). Stuart Hall's observation that "race is the modality in which class is lived [...] and the medium in which class relations are experienced" (Hall et. al. 1978: 394) seemed to apply in the context of South African skateboarding in a similar fashion as in the wider society.

This was also evident when looking at the spatial level. Despite its rebellious image and transgressive potential, skateboarding was exposed to and enmeshed in the reproduction of socio-spatial inequalities and residential segregation itself. It could challenge, but not escape the segregated realities in South African cities, and socio-spatial divisions in the youth cultural and sports landscape were reflected rather clearly (Abraham 2017: 105). Closer friendships and the formation of crews, for example, tended to develop among skaters who lived close to each other, and were thus often in similar race and class positions within the residentially segregated society. The very high crime rate and uneven distribution of crime in South African cities, and mobility inequality in a residentially segregated society massively hampered the potential for social integration among skaters. Skate spots and skateparks in marginalised neighbourhoods, where violent crime was often a massive problem, seldom turned into diverse spaces in terms of race and class. Hard-to-reach and commercialised spaces in privileged neighbourhoods, on the other hand, (structurally) excluded many marginalised skaters, and predominantly provided skaters from privileged class backgrounds opportunities to skate and socialise. Thus, the residential segregation along race and class divisions of the wider society was reflected and reproduced in skateboarding in manifold ways.

Racialised class inequalities were particularly visible in the skateboarding industry, reproducing a highly charged, political issue much debated in post-apartheid South Africa within the subcultural sphere. The ownership structure in the industry had hardly changed after the end of apartheid. Lucrative and influential jobs were still occupied by White, class-privileged South Africans and internationals, while South Africans of colour were largely found in low-paid blue-collar jobs. Professional skateboarding was the only exception to this as a work sphere that promised a lot of subcultural prestige and visibility, but little income and long-term prospects, and required the

acceptance of high, individualised risks. Compared to the wider skateboarding scene, the skateboarding industry therefore seemed much less integrated, and, in a society historically shaped by European colonialism and racial capitalism, the question of racialised relations of exploitation was controversially discussed among skaters (cf. Mabasa 2022: 231; Magubane 1979: 419).

Despite the evident reproduction of overall social inequalities in various spheres of the sport and subculture, race and class inequalities were seldom openly debated in the public discourse. As much as the meritocratic, individualistic ethos in skateboarding helped to counter racism, class discrimination and other forms of exclusion and discrimination, by making the appreciation of individuals supposedly solely dependent on their individual performance regardless of their social background, it also seemed to contribute to the sidelining of social and political issues, and tended to provide legitimation for structurally rooted inequalities by framing them as the outcome of individual capabilities, motivations and decisions (cf. Bourdieu 1998: 42). Moreover, the tight entanglement of skateboarding and commercial marketing seemed to facilitate the exclusion of controversial debates around social inequalities and power relations within South African skateboarding from public discourse.²⁶² As I have illustrated, quite a number of skaters harshly criticised the persistence of race and class inequalities in skateboarding, and related them to the society's colonial and apartheid past. In the (commercialised) public discourse around skateboarding, however, these perspectives were practically absent.

Yet, skateboarding also held real potential to transcend the still segregated realities and promote social integration in post-apartheid South Africa on a quite practical level. Street skateboarding, in particular, encouraged to explore urban areas, transgress residentially segregated lifeworlds, and engage in public urban life and socially diverse contexts. Many skaters spoke of a liberating effect the sport had on their lives, which encouraged them to 'broaden their horizon' and had brought them in touch with other skaters and city dwellers from a wide spectrum of social backgrounds. In a way, street skateboarding could be educational and casually expose skaters to the manifold life realities in urban spaces. It encouraged the questioning of the socio-spatial order and the self-conscious appropriation of urban architecture in an unequal and unjust society, and thus also brought with it the potential to question societal power relations and their infrastructural embedding in post-apartheid South Africa.

Above all, however, skateboarding offered a an identity framework and (imagined) community that connected skaters of very different social positions and backgrounds on a national and international level. Skateboarding was indeed a globalised youth and sports culture that could unfold productive

²⁶² Pappalardo, Anthony (27.12.2019): Skateboarding is not progressive: poking holes in perception, Artless, online-source: <https://anthonypappalardo.substack.com/p/skateboarding-is-not-progressive> [accessed: 15.11.2022].

potential in the context of the divided post-apartheid society (cf. Borden 2019: 26; Wheaton 2013: 109). Under certain conditions, skateboarding facilitated the development of socially integrated spaces and diverse social networks. This was particularly the case when skateparks and skate spots offered attractive opportunities to skate and hang out, could be used free of charge and were easy to access by private and public transport from a wide spectrum of urban areas. If such spaces attracted a regular stream of visiting skateboarders, they generated safe spaces that allowed for social interaction under race, class, ethnic, age and national diversity, and contributed to the integration of the South African society on a small scale. Even if the social interaction in skateboarding spaces could remain quite superficial, social encounters in skate spaces carried the potential to turn into meaningful social relationships and friendships. And indeed, it seemed to me that especially many street skaters maintained quite diverse friendship circles that they had built through the sport and subculture.

The socially integrative effects of skateboarding certainly had limits when it came to gender. South African skateboarding was generally an enormously male dominated sport with an extremely small number of female participants. Skate spots and skateparks were often male dominated spaces where girls and women could only be found at the sidelines. It was in the professional sector where the marginal position of girls and women in skateboarding was most visible and pronounced. On the one hand, the marginalisation of girls and women was partly produced by the comprehensive structural discrimination in a patriarchal society that massively disadvantaged them regarding the access to resources essential to access skateboarding, and confronted them with gendered forms of discrimination and violence in urban public spaces (cf. Abraham 2017: 105). On the other hand, girls and women encountered more or less subtle forms of sexism in the often male dominated skateboarding spaces. Unlike boys and men, girls and women could not rely on being accepted and appreciated among male skaters as legitimate members of the subcultural and sportive community. Skateboarding was largely a male domain that ideologically, practically and structurally favoured the reproduction of patriarchal relations, and the marginalisation and exclusion of girls and women. When skaters spoke of the skateboarding scene as a 'brotherhood', the perception of skateboarding as a male sport and subculture was captured in a nutshell.

Skateboarding and (the performance of) masculinity turned out to be closely intertwined on various levels. I have argued that the constitution of skateboarding masculinity and its recognition in the wider society was based in particular on the radical instrumentalisation of the body and the skaters' offensive approach to space that involved the transgression of norms and managing of manifold risks in South African cities. Fundamentally, skateboarding exemplified the central role and

interplay of physicality and space in the constitution of gender (cf. Bourdieu 2005: 54, 93f.; Yochim 2018: 179f.), placing itself within the traditional role of physically demanding and spatially extensive sports as an important medium for the production of masculinity, and involving a conflicting relationship with femininity (Abulhawa 2008: 64; Connell 2005: 79; Bourdieu 2005: 93f.). In the historical development of street skateboarding, the devaluation of femininity had remained a characteristic aspect, even though liberal perspectives on gender and sexuality have become more common in skateboarding culture in recent years. Sexism seemed to be an inherent aspect of street skateboarding to a degree, facilitating corresponding forms of discrimination, exclusion and devaluation of female skaters.

In the context of circulating conceptions of violent masculinities in South Africa, skateboarding could still provide a foil to acquire and perform a sportive, peaceful and playful 'alternative' masculinity while still providing evidence of physical and mental prowess and strength, risk affinity and bravado (cf. Denham 2010: 144; Langa 2020: 107ff.; Morrell 2001: 16). Yet, the glorification of a tough, physical masculinity observed in skateboarding nurtured not only the exclusion and devaluation of femininity, but also of 'soft' and effeminate masculinities. Homophobia enjoyed a certain legitimacy in skateboarding, and had played a visible role in the sport's history in North America, Western Europe and South Africa (Borden 2001: 148; Yochim 2007: 15). Being gay was not an unencumbered circumstance in skateboarding, but something regarded extraordinary, unusual and 'abnormal', at times looked down upon and feared and loathed by some boys and (young) men (cf. Langa 2020: 66). Taking the case of the professional skater Yann Horowitz as an example, I have uncovered some of the specific challenges gay skaters had to navigate in a latently homophobic sport, subculture and society. The socially integrative potential of skateboarding, therefore, seldom involved girls and women, and boys and men who self-identified or were stereotyped as gay or effeminate. Throughout its historical development, skateboarding had remained a playing field dominated by heterosexual boys and men, and a socio-cultural space celebrating and glorifying rather stereotypical masculine virtues. It predominantly offered heterosexual boys and men opportunities to interact and socially connect in the play spaces that were created by it, and mutually recognise each other as members of a subcultural, sportive, imagined and masculine community. A shared conception of masculinity among skaters facilitated the 'bridging' of social divisions related to race, class, ethnicity, and nationality.

As a result of this analysis, the social relations in and around skateboarding turned out to be a complex matter in terms of race, class, gender and sexuality. Skateboarding was certainly not a 'magical tool' to create socially integrated spaces and contribute to the 'healing' of the post-

apartheid society as some proponents of the sport were claiming. Despite its somewhat cosmopolitan character, and symbolic proximity to rebellious and socially diverse urban youth cultures, skateboarding did not necessarily carry an inherently progressive core. While it could provide a sense of liberation, it also revealed the forces and constraints that curtailed one's freedoms. While in certain contexts skateboarding promoted socially diverse interaction, and mutual understanding and solidarity in a very diverse and unequal society, it fitted into and reproduced divisive social relations and structures in others (cf. Coalter 2010: 98). The image of skateboarding as a particularly 'empowering' and socially integrated space that was disseminated by commercial players in the skateboarding industry in this light appeared as a sugarcoating (marketing) narrative concealing ambivalent and problematic aspects (cf. Coakley 2011: 307; Yochim 2018: 194). With my thesis I sought to paint a more realistic picture of skateboarding as a social space, in which intersectionally conceptualised social inequalities and power relations are illuminated in particular detail.

As a social microcosm, and as a niche sport and subculture celebrating self-discipline, self-expression, and entrepreneurial and meritocratic values, carrying the promise to welcome and reward anybody devoted to the game, the inquiry of skateboarding also provided an opportunity to reflect on the hopes placed in the societal impacts of sports, sub- and youth cultures, and leisure activities under democratic capitalism and neoliberalism in post-apartheid South Africa. In a sense, investigating South African skateboarding provided a magnifying glass through which societal developments and issues in post-apartheid South Africa became tangible, and illustrated that the creation of a meritocratic playing field does not necessarily lead to social equality and a fair game in a very unequal society. As long as the societal realities surrounding the playfield cause participants to enter and engage in the game from very different starting points and with different opportunities, the unequal social realities tend to be reproduced rather than overcome within the game (cf. Bourdieu 1998: 42f.; Samara 2011: 182; Terreblanche 2002: 422f.).

Mandela's statement that the "sport has the power to change the world"²⁶³ and Hawk's variation that "skateboarding can change the world"²⁶⁴ claimed a connection that was hard to sustain from this perspective (cf. Coalter 2010: 17). Instead, one might rather conclude that 'the world has the power to change the sport'. The socio-historical development of skateboarding in South Africa has illustrated clearly that its opening up would have been hardly possible without the long, violent and

263 Laureus (09.02.2020): Nelson Mandela's Iconic Speech – "Sport has the power to change the world" – Full Version [video], Youtube, online-source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1-7w-bJCtY> [accessed: 8.6.2020].

264 Laureus (n.d.): Skateboarding is Life [website], online-source: <https://www.laureus.co.za/skateboarding-is-life/> [accessed: 30.05.2020].

sacrificial political struggle leading to the fall of the apartheid regime and the introduction of democracy. Despite the successful fight of the resistance and oppositional movement for equal political rights of all South Africans, the inequalities perpetuated in post-apartheid South Africa significantly limited the opportunities to create a harmonious ‘rainbow nation’, and improving the lives of the once oppressed and their children. The prophecies and promises of neoliberal reformers, such as Kendall and Louw (1987: 87), who claimed an equalisation of racialised class relations would come with barely regulated democratic capitalism, portrayed as a supposedly open, fair and meritocratic political and economic system allowing all members of society to participate and uplift themselves, and would be hindered, not furthered by affirmative action policies (cf. Mbembe 2008: 8f.), turned out to be questionable, perhaps even cynical in the light of the post-apartheid developments (cf. Bond 2004: 47; Sulla/Zikhali 2018: xiv).

In a highly commercialised sport and subculture, whose historically grown structures and ethos has been called neoliberal by some authors (Howell 2008: 480; Schweer 2014: 115f.; Yochim 2018: 181ff.), this issue was reflected. The ethnographic and historiographic inquiry of skateboarding has therefore highlighted the far reaching implications of persistent social inequalities and segregation in South Africa which sport and youth cultures could not easily escape or overcome. Despite the liberal, rebellious, and cosmopolitan impetus of skateboarding, which offered potential to challenge societal power relations and facilitated social interaction in diversity under a shared sporting and subcultural identity, structural inequalities never lost significance. As skateboarding veteran Ayusch from Johannesburg had put it:

“Like it’s not just your life on the board, it’s your life off the board, as well. You know, it’s like, it’s like what you are going home to when you are done skating. Everybody is not going home to the same thing.”

7 References

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8 Affidavit

I hereby declare that I have prepared this thesis without the unauthorised assistance of third parties and without the use of any aids other than those indicated; any ideas taken directly or indirectly from outside sources are identified as such. The thesis has not yet been submitted to another supervisory body in the same or a similar form, either in Germany or abroad, and has not yet been published.

Hans Berner

November 14, 2023