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Swamp Suburbia and Rebellion Against a Culture of Crime: The Birth Of Black Skateboarding in the Big Easy

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Swamp Surburbia and Rebellion Against a Culture of Crime:  
The Birth Of Black Skateboarding in the Big Easy

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  

Master of Science in  
Urban Studies  
with a concentration in Urban Anthropology

By

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May 2015
This research would not have been possible without the fearless skateboarders of this city, especially those who spent the past three years with me. Much love to Brad McCormick, the C.R.E.A.M. team, and all the young skaters who continue to create a community of beauty and support. Keep pushing, your advocacy group is growing.

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ABSTRACT

This research addresses a significant gap in previous work on the formation of urban and suburban black skateboarding subcultures. By using data generated through oral histories, photographs, mapping, and literature review, this study explores why black youth initially began skateboarding in New Orleans in the mid-2000s. In contrast to the scholarly literature and local popular perception, this visual anthropological study aims to provide an alternative origin story of black skateboarding in Post-Katrina New Orleans, and to examine the continuing popularity of the sport within the young black community.

Key words: [African American, black, youth, urban space, skateboarding, skateboards, New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina]
New Orleans is built on the instability of mud and lowlands, and it is a place of many kinds of violence; but it is also built on love, pleasure, public joy and affection, memory, and faithful attachment.
- Rebecca Solnit, The Unfathomable City a New Orleans Atlas

THEY THINK SKATEBOARDING IS JUST A LITTLE WHITE BOY SPORT

On June 21, 2012, during the international celebration of skateboarding deemed “Go Skate Day,” I was surveying the crowd at Hunter’s Field park, near the 8th Ward Claiborne Avenue Interstate 10 onramp. Hundreds of eager skateboarders were performing tricks over ramps, watching from the sidelines and posing for pictures. They were gathered peacefully and playfully from multiple neighborhoods in the city, joining their fellow skaters in a day-long celebration of their sport and their community. This community was different than most skateboard communities I had been a part of over the past twenty years of my life. The community was made up of mostly black males.

Having grown up skateboarding outside of Los Angeles in the 1990s, I was accustomed to attending skate contests and demonstrations, reading magazines, viewing advertisements, and watching skateboard company-sponsored videos that reaffirmed the mainstream image of skateboarding as the domain of the suburban white boy (Atencio, Beal, and Yochim 2013:154). In an interview with artist and skate park advocate Skylar Fein, he remarked, “It struck me as really notable when I moved to New Orleans what a black phenomenon it [skateboarding] was. I didn’t see it in California or Seattle, it was a white dominated sport.”

In photographer Hugh Holland’s iconic book Locals Only: California Skateboarding 1975–1978, each page exhibits dreamy, warm-toned images of shirtless and bloodied—and mostly blonde—rebellious preteen boys. The California sunset backlights their long mops of flowing hair as they zip through emptied backyard pools on newly invented urethane wheels.
These and other iconic images of skateboarding have helped create a particular reputation for the sport as a “suburban white kids’ pursuit,” though there are many diverse narratives associated with the sport, the most recent narrative is the black voice (Atencio, Beal, and Yochim 2013:154).

Skateboarding as a sport is indeed inclusive and accepting, as black former professional skateboarder Chris Pastras notes: “All in all, skateboarding is color blind, you know. And that’s what makes it so great” (Ray 2011). However historically it did not appeal to blacks as a whole. In describing how the bulk of his community viewed his years working towards a career in skateboarding, professional skateboarder Antwuan Dixon said, “They think that skateboarding is just a little white boy sport” (Ray 2011).

In the 2007 New York Times article, “Skateboarding Rolls out of the Suburbs,” journalist Ben Detrick reflected on the decade’s cultural shift occurring in skating, attributing the
blackening of the sport to key rappers the Lil Wayne and Pharrell Williams, both of whom had begun actively advocating for the sport.

This was coupled with the marketing power that had weakened the previously toxic stigma attached to skateboarding within black neighborhoods. Steven Snyder, 45, a former professional skateboarder now managing Uprise skate shop in Chicago, told Detrick that “black people would look at me like I was the brother who fell from another planet.” Snyder went on to compare the social stigma of skating within the black community to that of “making out with a white woman in the 1950s down South (2007).

While it was a conventionally humid and scorching summer day, the gathering under the interstate allowed the skateboarders to practice without the brutality of the direct sun, a communal decision to meet under the shelter of the concrete. I surveyed the crowd, comparing this community with the community I had embraced on the West Coast. I squinted my eyes,
cocked my head, and leaned over to ask life-long New Orleanian and skateboard community elder Todd Taylor, “Do you remember when all these young black kids first started skating here?”

“Sometime after the storm,” he replied. “None of us [skateboarders pre-Katrina] have any idea why they started. It must have been Lil’ Wayne and Pharrell or some shit.”

Or did New Orleans’ black kids start skateboarding after the storm for a different reason that was not rooted in marketing and popular culture, a reason that was not explored in mass media and scholarly literature? According to one my participants Lance, 16, “Lil Wayne might inspire some kids, I guess, not me, he didn’t inspire me at all.” I decided to embark on a two-year ethnographic study to answer the question: why did black kids begin skateboarding in a post-Katrina New Orleans?
My research traces the birth and development of this local youth community through the lens of social and psychological capital, use and transgression of public space, a post-disaster climate, and the landmark crime rates in the City of New Orleans. Most importantly, this research allows the voices of local black skateboarders to speak through collected oral histories, so that they might tell their own stories and histories. Their voices, along with other qualitative research methods of photography and mapping, helped me to create a communal narrative that exists in contrast to skateboard elders’ perceptions, such as the popular beliefs epitomized by Detrick’s previous remarks, and the minimal literature on African-American skateboarding driven by a single scholar Becky Beal.

FOUR WHEELS IN THE FIELD

A goal of my research was to understand why black youth began skateboarding in New Orleans and how it gained popularity. In echoing the predominant literature, I began my research based on the assumption that young black kids in New Orleans began skateboarding in order to claim public space, gain capital, and create a subculture of resistance to the dominant social norm. Drawing from the existing scholarly literature, I assumed racialized corporate marketing, coupled with celebrity skateboard advocates dissipating the stigma, were the driving factors in the birth of black skateboarding in New Orleans. It seemed to be as simple as Todd observed on that day in Hunters Field park: “It must have been Lil’ Wayne and Pharrell or some shit.”

I embarked on a two-year ethnographic study of what I found to be a much more complex subculture. Through accumulated oral histories, I was able to surmise that the subculture arose from the physical landscape and diminished infrastructure of Hurricane Katrina’s aftermath,
fueled by personal choices to create a safe and empowering community distanced from the violence and crime that has long plagued New Orleans’ young black population.

I wanted to explore the notion that there was something extremely unique about this community, something that separated it from the academic narrative, something that was so heavily tied to the land, history, and sociopolitical factors of New Orleans itself. The research sites were accessible and within daily reach, and it was already a community of which I was a member of. Thus, I was neither geographically, morally or socially distant from what Robert Sanjeck calls, an anthropologist’s “cultural metropolis” (1990:66).

In late June 2012, I began my fieldwork with a camera in one hand and a skateboard in the other. I looked at six active skate spots that were peppered throughout the city, locally known as: Parisite, Humidity Skate shop, The Read Library, One Shell Square, Poydras, and the Claiborne Steps. The first phase of my qualitative study was to have simple, conversational, open-ended interviews on site with black skaters. I would ask five baseline questions:

- How long have you been skating?
- Why did you start skating?
- Who were your initial influences?
- What neighborhood are you from and where do you mostly skate?
- Who were the first black skaters you remember seeing in town?

The answers to these initial questions would inform new, targeted questions administered within an open-ended, semi-structured interview fashion. I transcribed and coded the interviews, isolating recurring ideas, words, reasons, places, names, etc. Conducting these initial interviews—and allowing my interviewees to guide me to the next participant—I was able to isolate the first wave of skaters to pick up boards within the first two years after Katrina, 2006–2008. By interviewing and photographing skateboarders with a wide range of experience, from kids who had been skateboarding for a mere six months to kids who were the only black people
doing it in town nearly fifteen years ago, I was able to construct a communal narrative and oral history detailing why kids initially started skating and why they continue to do so.

![Figure 4. Tools in the field. 2015.](image)

According to Robert Emerson, the reflexive character in ethnographic research should understand other worlds “shaped not by variables or structures that stand above or apart from people but rather as meaning systems negotiated and constructed in and through relationships” (1995:216). Essentially, reflexivity in the research process consists of analytic focus on the researchers relationship to their field of study. My reflexive approach with interviewing and interacting with participants forced me to constantly examine myself, my role as a researcher, and to understand the situational dynamics of interviewee and interviewer that produce shared knowledge. As a mid-thirties white woman, I was very mindful and aware that I was a visitor within this young black community. However, given that I skateboard and the skateboarding
community as a whole is an extremely hospitable one, I was welcomed within the circle and we held reciprocated respect for one another. I conducted approximately 100 casual interviews. I mapped spaces, photographed the skaters and their skate spots, and then reframed the focus of my research.

This research in the black skateboarding community has been, and will continue to be, a collaborative endeavor based upon the model of Community-based Participatory Research (CBPR) presented in the work of Minkler and Wallersterin (2008:4). I have tried to work intimately with the participants in this ethnographic exploration to assure that they are involved in all aspects of the research process. My intent is for them to have equal ownership over the final product that is “community-based not community placed” (Minkler and Wallerstein 2008:1). According to Minkler and Wallersterin, there are a set of core principles and characteristics that define CBPR:

- It is participatory.
- It is cooperative, engaging community members and researchers in a joining process in which both contribute equally.
- It is a co-learning process.
- It involves systems development and local community capacity building.
- It is an empowering process through which participants can increase control over their lives.
- It achieves a balance between research and action (2008:4).

By integrating my research skills with their local knowledge and experience, the goal of this research is to serve as an accessible anthropological study that can be used to inform policy and aid in the creation of more skate parks in the city of New Orleans.

I began a more in-depth visual ethnographic study of one established crew of skateboarders (I use first names only for participants) aged 15–20, longtime friends—Brad, Lance, Trey, Anthony, Trey, Chuck, Justin, Jamize, Kendrick, Kacey—who call their crew C.R.E.A.M, a cheeky riff on either Pharrell’s company or the seminal Staten Island hip-hop
group Wu-Tang Clan’s song “Cash Rules Everything Around Me,” depending on who you ask in the clique. My point person was, the then 18-year-old, now 20-year-old, Brad who was instrumental in welcoming me into the crew. For two years I skateboarded with them, ran from and negotiated with the police, spent hours at skate spots, and photographed and interviewed each team member several times.

Figure 5. Four members of the C.R.E.A.M. team. 2013.
Their individual and shared experiences, communicated as images with accompanying interview transcriptions, are meant to help my readers to differentiate between the scholarly and popular narrative of their motivations and history and their personal accounts of motivation and history.

THE VALUE OF VISUAL

As a professional photographer I naturally employed visual research, but given the nature of this research I feel photography is a preferable methodology as the image is data and the image is a form of communication. The highly influential contemporary visual anthropologist Jerome Crowder asserts that visual data holds an ability to evoke feelings and facilitate understanding and insight (2008:31). The ethnographic images presented here “allow the audience to study multiple details simultaneously, serially, at length, and either in isolation or in relation to each other in a way that linear media (including video) do not permit” (Marion and Crowder 2013:53). Photographs represent a tactile reality, a near-tangible and emotional connection between the viewer and the subject.

In an interview with visual anthropologist Ruth Behar, she says “I think photographs allow for an intense and immediate relationship with a people and a place, while texts, like ethnography, require more of a gradual buildup through storytelling to give the viewer/reader the same kind of impact” (Behar and Brink-Danan 2012:1). The accompanying written word, and the oral histories presented in this thesis, provide a context for the imagery and thus provide a more balanced anthropological exploration.

More importantly, these images speak back to Hugh Holland’s iconic images and challenge the dominant visuals that the word “skateboarder” has evoked over the past 50 years.
It’s not a white thing anymore. “They’re black, ride skateboards, and refuse to apologize” and their narrative is a welcome addition to the history of the sport (Kim 2007).

This holistic approach, and extensive interviewing, answered my initial research question and asserts that the black skate community formed in New Orleans was not a response to advertising and media that the scholars purport. I recorded the participants’ images, their stories and their histories, compiling them into this piece with their proofreading and approval.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SKATE CULTURE TRANSFORMATION

While people had previously created makeshift wheeled boards, it was the Southern California surfers of the 1960s who created skateboards to serve as a concrete extension of surfing and who played a pivotal role in the initial mass marketing of the sport (Beal 2013:9).

Initially, the culture of skateboarding was young, male, and almost exclusively white. Certain societal factors fueled a burgeoning market and laid the groundwork for the new youth activity. America was still enjoying its post World War II economic boom, “teenage” was a new and prevalent social category, and sprawling suburbanization afforded new leisure activities for youth within manufactured communities (Nicolaides 2006:88). In 1963, surfer Larry Stevenson founded Makaha Skateboards and promptly held the first properly organized skate contest in Hermosa Beach, California, an early indicator of the community construction and economic potential of the sport (Beal 2013:xv).

In this thesis, I employ sociologists Kimball Young and Raymond W. Mack’s definition of subculture as “shared learned behaviors which are common to a specific group” (Yinger 1960:625). The subculture of skateboarding would change forms within the framework of identity development through “industry” promotion and mass marketing over the next five
decades. The sidewalk-surfin’ culture of Southern California would grow to be a monolithic cultural power and a $5 billion dollar industry by 2010 (Beal 2013:xx). This transformation comprised a vast and ever-changing array of niche identity and lifestyle signifiers that became synonymous with skateboarding.

The sport would prove to be a cultural product as well as a cultural producer (Crosset and Beal 1997:73). These identities were either created by skateboarders, co-opted by the industry, or created by the industry (Honea 2004:3). According to Beale, the lifestyle accompanying the skateboard proved to be seductive to America’s youth, and the immense persuasion and clout that skateboarding wielded was second perhaps only to hip-hop, which was the greatest influence on American youth culture of the late twentieth century (Beal 2013:3).

Julian, 23, grew up as one of the only black skaters in Lake Charles, Louisiana: “I was into the fashion, the look, the style more than the skateboarding itself,” he told me in an interview:
I skateboarded a little, but what attracted me to the culture was the style and the skater look, a look that always changed. It went from no shirt, short shorts, and tube socks in the 70s to baggy everything in the 90s. The look was always amazing, and by skating you got to own that look (Interview, c. 2015).

Skateboarding has never fully been accepted by the mainstream culture and according to former professional Tommy Guerrero “it [skateboarding] was always for people who got shunned by the masses” (Mortimer 2008:113). According to Beal, while it is a massive and profitable industry, skateboarding is deemed illegal in most major cities with minimal state-sanctioned skateboard arenas, she says “this tension between public sanction and self-governance is continually illustrated by the legal status of the sport” (2013:107). Skateboarders are often hassled by private property owners, and they can easily be ticketed on the streets or have their boards confiscated by the law. In an interview with Trey, 17, he says, “we got fucked with by the cops a bunch, but we still did it, we didn’t stop. We weren’t doing anything wrong, but understand it wasn’t our property, I wouldn’t want anybody doing that to my property.”

Figure 7. Photographs found in Brads bedroom. Photos by Brad. 2015.
Elaine Stratford attests the general public views skating as “jeopardizing the civic and commercial virtues of urban spaces and the rights of other users of those spaces. Skaters are renegade” (2002:193).

Aside from the 1960s, when skateboarding was as innocuous as the hula-hoop, the sport has always been celebrated for its rebellious edge renegade categorization. While skateboarding’s reputation has been as a suburban white kids’ activity, it has been a rebellious and alternative suburban white kids activity (Atencio, Beal, and Yochim 2013:154). In Stalefish: Skateboard Culture from the Rejects Who Made It, Sean Mortimer writes:

Participating in an activity that is outlawed in most areas is a good way to experience that distinction [between in-groups and out-groups]. That’s why skateboarding has historically attracted the disenfranchised and produces a subculture so tight that it can retard social growth (2008:105).

Skateboarding in the 1960s saw the invention of free styling and downhill racing, which shifted the perception of the sport from being a children’s pastime to a unique, albeit dangerous activity. In 1966, the medical field’s disapproval of the sport caused a drastic decrease in popularity (Beal 2013:11). Skateboarding returned to popularity in the 1970s, helped by a diversification of technology and style, the advent of street-adept urethane wheels and larger board shapes, a concentration on the more aggressive bank and ramp skating, the new concept of raising your board off the ground, a new profitable rebellious identity, promotion of the sport through magazines and movies, and an interest from non-skateboard corporations—like Pepsi—to endorse the outsider sport (Beal 2013:17).

In the 1980s, skate culture fused with punk rock and “street style” skaters began to more adeptly and aggressively adapt to urban terrain. There was a move among skateboarders themselves to take control of the industry through company ownership and entrepreneurship (Beal 2013:14). The 1990s saw the launch of Big Brother magazine. It glorified the
drugs/sex/rock ‘n’ roll aspect of skateboarding. Then, the monolith corporation Nike entered the market by sponsoring skaters. Skateboarding became ubiquitous in mainstream commercials for fast food and cars, and skater-run companies saw great success with marketing strategies rooted in challenging the mainstream ethos (Beal 2013:27).

Skateboarding expanded even further in the 2000s into a global commodity with the advent of the ESPN X-Games, an industry push to rebrand the pastime as a viable competitive sport, and an explosion of video games geared towards legitimizing skateboarding as a viable youth hobby. The 2000s also ushered in the visibility and acceptance of the black skateboarder. The subculture now has prominent role models who have retained enough black identity so as not to be viewed as “sell outs” or “white boys” (Kim 2007).

Mass and mainstream media have played a significant role in establishing widespread appeal and selling the skateboarding image (Beal 2013:37). From the international broadcast of the ESPN X-Games competition to MTV partnering with professional skateboarders to create

Figure 8. Walls of Brad’s bedroom. Photos on right by Brad. 2014–2015.
reality programming in order to gain new youth viewership, mass media have played a vital role in the distribution and subsequent monetization of the sport.

In various ways, skateboarders pushed back against the global corporations. Professional skateboarders exerted a concerted backlash to gain control over their own image and the sale of that image, so they started to run their own companies and created their own media (Mortimer 2008:115). It was a struggle to maintain the unique ground-level personality of skateboarding when pitted against the lucrative pre-packaged skateboard lifestyle. Internationally-celebrated professional Tony Hawk commented on the corporate takeover, “They [corporations] didn’t get the concept of true skateboarding, it was more about aesthetics” (Mortimer 2008:139). In the early 2000s corporate stakeholders discovered the potential revenue stream of the “black dollar” for the “white industry.”

**FROM THE STREETS TO ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS**

This thesis approaches the formation of the black skateboarding subculture in the three-part framework: exclusion from and transgression of public space, social and psychological capital and identity formation. The word “subculture” is used quite often in the social sciences with multiple definitions. I use the definition that is more closely related to the term counterculture, which “describes those groups in which the normative system contains as its primary element conflict with or rejection of a dominant culture” (Honea 2004:3). Crosset and Beal note that ethnographers must understand that subculture status is not a claim by the subgroup itself, but rather defined by their treatment by members of dominant groups (1997:80). There was one article on black skateboarding, written by skateboarding scholar Becky Beal of California State University of East Bay. The existing literature on skateboarding as a whole was
extremely helpful in framing my research. However, the lack of literature specifically related to my topic left an uncharted terrain and exciting ethnographic study to embark on. I wanted to research why black youth began skateboarding in New Orleans, and thus question if this particular subculture of local black skateboarding was born out of Beal’s theory of black-targeted marketing and celebrity advocacy, a theory that also echoed local public opinion, or if there were other reasons for the subcultural formation that have not yet been discovered. Most importantly, I wanted to provide a forum for the community to speak for themselves, to tell their own creation story. Freeman and Riordan’s framework was particularly helpful in structuring my research. Their study of exclusion and the relationship young people have with society helped me situate youths position in post-Katrina New Orleans. In “Locating Skateparks,” they identify seven common core issues that force youth to “occupy a special position of exclusion”:

A tendency to be physically, socially and economically marginalized.
Limited access to public policy debates and decision-making processes.
An uneasy relationship with mainstream society.
The existence of a diversity of youth subcultures.
A tendency to use the environment in a different way.
A greater dependence on public services such as buses, parks and sports facilities.
A shortage of dedicated youth facilities (Freeman and Riordan 2002:299).

In “Thrashing Downtown: Play as Resistance to the Spatial and Representational Regulation of Los Angeles,” Steven Flusty poses the question “what is the city, according to whom?” He goes on to note how the voices of street-going residents—including skateboarders—are muted as the voices of authority define the city, and how it is used (2000:150).

French sociologist and Marxist intellectual Henri Lefebvre writes: “space still appears as ‘reality’ inasmuch as it is the milieu of accumulation, of growth, of commodities, of money, of capital; but this ‘reality’ loses its substantial and autonomous aspect once its development—i.e.
production—is traced” (Lefebvre 199:129). Space is thus created by society and is maintained through changing concepts of intended use, following the laws of accumulation of capital and shaped by human activity (Shirtcliff 2012:9–10). I adopt Catherine Robinson’s framework to address skateboarding youth in New Orleans:

Analytical approaches applied to youth/space issues have been broadly focused on two important parts of these processes; first the marginalization for youth or how the structuring of spaces impacts on young people and second, young people’s roles in both subverting and constructing spatial/social order (2000:432).

Youth are alienated from taking an active role in society, in public policy creation and in the political decision-making process. Thus, they experience a sense of “placenessness” because they lack designated age-accommodating spaces and are unable to access certain public spaces due to their age (Freeman and Riordan 2002:298). In addition, due to their economic dependence and lack of independent mobility, they are excluded from many commercial elements of society. Thus, they have to create social and physical space in alternative ways (Freeman and Riordan 2002:298). According to Freeman and Riordan, construction of space takes place primarily at the level of the powerful, given the marginalization of youth they must use marginal spaces in the creation of identities to confront and remodel social and spacial constraints within society (2002:297).

In “Creating Space Creating Selves,” Robinson notes that young people respond to these constraints, and their own needs, by creating meaning and identity through space (2000:430). Echoing Lefebvre, Setha Low, a space-focused anthropologist, identifies social and spatial exclusion as symptoms of neoliberal strategy, governance and legal institutional practices (2009:402). She addresses how people create space within the framework of exclusion:

The social construction of space is the social, psychological, and functional transformation of space—through people’s social exchanges, memories, images, emotions, and daily use of the material setting—into scenes and actions that convey meaning. Both processes are social in the sense that the production and construction of
space are mediated by social processes, especially because they are contested and fought over for economic and ideological reason (2009:392).

Figure 9. Skateboard personalization. 2015.

Youth are perceived as a threat within communities, and “youth as problems” is a reoccurring theme within our society (Freeman and Riordan 2002:2009). The fear and anxiety of youth and youth crime has thus affected the treatment of young people in the public sphere, it has affected how space is designated for them (Robinson 2000:430).

James A. Tyner affirms the long history in the United States of black marginalization by sustaining a “colour-caste system” through ghetto creation, residential segregation, and inner-city disinvestment, essentially spatially trapping blacks (2007:225). Given what Andrews calls a “rigid and limited grid of representations through which black male subjects become publicly visible,” black youth in the city are especially marginalized and feared. They receive little public spacial accommodation (Andrews 1996:132). Thus, young blacks must claim and reimagine the city by creating alternate geographies (Tyner 2007:219).
Skateboarders specifically respond to this marginalization by transgressing public space and visibly challenging the notions of public space use rights. They are using public space in creative ways bringing attention to the issue of youth and planning (Freeman and Riordan 2002:297).

Figure 10. Skylar Fein at Parisite. 2014.

Skylar Fein, an artist and founder of the newly legal Parisite skate park, remarked on the creativity involved in skateboarding: “When you see someone skating a line, it’s a sport, but it’s also a performance. It’s choreographed, it’s artful, it contains artistry, it’s an amazing mix of things. It’s impossible to take it apart and make sense of it” (Interview, c. 2015). In an interview, Lance commented on use of public space: “I like to skate street, mostly rails and stairs,” he said. “You ain’t gotta worry about nothing. We [skateboarders] look at the world differently. A
normal person would just be like, oh those are stairs. We see if we can skate it” (c. 2013).

Given that planners generally focus on adults and have little understanding of young people’s relationship with the urban environment, there is a lack of sanctioned space in cities for skateboarding (Freeman and Riordan 2002:298).

Susie Weller writes about capital gain through site-specific alternative forms of civic engagement. A skate park would be an example of a public place where civic engagement takes place, as well as an important arena for creating friendships and establishing social links and networks (Weller 2006:571). Given the “institutionalized distrust” of young people—rooted in different societal values—these networks are largely unrecognized by society as active civic and community contributions or as a viable forms of gaining social capital (see Weller 2006:572). Skateboarders are also seen as dangerous, reckless and physically threatening to adults (Freeman and Riordan 2002:302). This institutionalized distrust and threat is further exacerbated through racial fear and the construction of urban black youth as signifiers of danger and social decay (Andrews 1996:132).

In addition to social capital, the skateboarding community gains psychological capital through the nature of the sport, along with the progression and personal advancement that accompanies learning tricks (Demerath, Lynch, and Davidson 2008:286). The literature has shown that participation in sports in general has beneficial outcomes in adolescent health and development, including educational attainment and higher educational ambitions (Dodge and Lambert 2009:813). In conclusion, the literature suggests that sports such as skateboarding are beneficial in creating personal and social gain for young people. However, given the stigmatized nature of skateboarding and the fear of black males, black youths participating in skateboarding are not recognized as viable contributors to the city or society.
According to Woolley and Johns, the teenage years are a formative period where young people grow independent from their parents and begin to establish their self-identity through building blocks of musical styles, dress codes, opinions, chosen social group and free time leisure activities (2001:212). According to Woolley and Johns, skateboarders have a strong sense of unique self identity through such building blocks, as well as a subcultural construction that resists capitalist social relations (2001:215). According to Manuel Castells:

By virtue of an alternative life style in a spatial sub-set of the urban system, a ‘city’ emerges within the city (not outside the existing city and not necessarily against other communities) in a process that transforms established cultural values and existing spatial forms (1983:139).

In essence, Castells links community creation with the need to produce or co-opt space so that the community can thrive. This is an act of place-making. This is clearly true of skateboarding, an activity that is dependent on space and terrain.
SKURBAN: ROLLING OUT OF THE SUBURBS AND INTO THE HOOD

The minimal discourse –one academic journal article– on black skateboarding is framed within the marketing creation and media dissemination of “skurban,” the intersection of urban culture and skateboarding (Beal 2013:83). Skurban signifies the monetary value of urban racial masculinities that enhance youth and action sport brand marketing strategies (Atencio, Beal, and Yochim 2013:153). The crux of Beal’s argument relating to the recent popularity of black skateboarding is, she argues, the creation and marketing of the black skurban lifestyle that has compromised the “whiteness” of the sport. This marketing along with the proliferation of black celebrities advocating for skateboarding in the mass media has disrupted the iconic “middle-class suburban white boy” imagery and has thus weakened the stigma of the sport in black communities (Atencio, Beal, and Yochim 2013:154). With more ease, black youth can now cruise the streets without the previous looming scare of excommunication from their...
communities. Skurban is their “passport to cruise the projects without fear” (Kim 2007). It is a form of market revitalization that “individualized the raced images of skateboarding, using minority racial bodies to increase the sport’s cool factor while idealizing individualized, differently-branded personae” (Atencio, Beal, and Yochim 2013:159). Essentially, scholarly and public discourse attributes the popularity of black skateboarding to racialized skurban corporate marketing, coupled with black celebrity advocacy for the sport. Thus, making the sport more palatable in black communities.

There have been four crucial players who epitomized the new skurban cool factor in the 2000s, advocated for the sport, and were instrumental in corporate marketing. These four players are prominent in the literature and in public discourse. Because there was only minimal literature on black skateboarding, I have casually interviewed at least 100 elders of the skate community in New Orleans as well as non-skateboarding residents. I wanted to uncover the emics, or outsiders’ view, of local black skateboarding in order to understand the popular creation story of the community. My general conclusion, and echoing the literature, is that the popular perception maintains that the four key players outlined below were responsible for this new generation of skateboarders.

WILLIAMS, WAYNE, WILLIAMS, FIASCO

Stevie Williams, b. 1979

Deemed by multiple skate magazines as one of the most influential skateboarders of all time, the creation story of Stevie Williams is an almost mythological American rags-to-riches tale. Originally from the Philadelphia housing projects, Williams spent a stint homeless until he gained major product sponsorship, critical acclaim, and became the first professional
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skateboarder (with gold teeth and gold chains no less) to sign a contract with Reebok in 2004. That sponsorship marked a major milestone of corporate crossover into the general skateboarding market and the black skateboarding market. In the Reebok video lifestyle campaign entitled “I am what I am,” Williams tells the camera: “Everything that I do ain’t nothing that’s overnight, that’s everything I been through in my whole life. Being dark skinned and being called white, unwanted being a skateboarder, to being laughed at by the community, even feeling embarrassed to hold my skateboard” (Mcgarrybowen 2005).

Stevie Williams founded Dirty Ghetto Kids (DGK), skateboard and apparel company, in 2010, compiling a team of the industry’s elite professionals under its sponsorship moniker. The company speaks to “Williams’ heritage” by selling products emblazoned with the company’s signature graphics that proclaim “I ♥ haters” and “hood pass.”

In a 2013 *Transworld* magazine video interview, directed by Skin Phillips, profiling the thirty most important skateboarders of all time, Williams reflects on the early endorsement of black skateboarding by companies trying to tap the youth market:

Other kids that can, kind of, relate to Stevie Williams. I won’t even say, like, black, I’ll just say urban kids, that would be like, “Yo, I can still be myself, and still be skating” and that’s what I heard a lot from a lot of these kids. And it took me a couple years to really analyze why these kids think that, you know, it’s so cool to do it. But at that time there was a void in the game and nobody was doing it, and I was just really being myself. So you had these companies coming along exposing, like, an urban skater (2012).

*Lil’ Wayne, b. 1982*

Hailing from the Hollygrove neighborhood of New Orleans, rap superstar Lil’ Wayne formed the seminal Southern rap group The Hot Boys with fellow Cash Money Records label-mates Juvenile, Young Turk, and B.G. in the late 1990s. He founded Young Money Entertainment in 2005 and spent the following decade releasing critically acclaimed albums, topping the Billboard charts with several number one songs, and winning a Best Rap Album Grammy for Tha Carter III. In 2012, Lil’ Wayne partnered with Mountain Dew and the New York brand strategy group the Glu Agency to open up the highly promoted Trukstop skate park in New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward (MacCash 2010). Mere weeks after the opening, Lil’ Wayne divested from the project, and the park quickly fell closed due to the lack of liability measures put into place.

His skateboard is a frequent accessory that accompanies him to press events, and recent Internet gossip suggests that he may be quitting the music industry in order to pursue his skateboarding passion.
“Basically the struggle put into skating is similar to the struggle put into creating music,” he said in an interview for The Skateboard Magazine. He continues: “Creativity, that’s the similarity right there. Creativity is in skating. Creativity is in music” (Jefferson 2012).

Figure 14. Lil Wayne at the opening of the Trukstop. Photo by Gerald Herbert. 2012.

*Pharrell Williams, b. 1973*

Through his extensive mass media inclusion, fashion designer and Grammy award-winning singer/songwriter/rapper/record producer Pharrell Williams could easily be the most responsible in the early 2000s’ for the crossover cultural appeal of skateboarding. He was the forerunner of brandishing black skate culture for the mainstream eye. Nicknamed “Skateboard P,” Williams’ iconic success in the music industry, with his solo career and his groups Neptunes and N.E.R.D., has disseminated black skate culture internationally by proxy.

In the 2002 N.E.R.D. music video for the single “Rock Star,” Pharrell Williams performed atop a ramp with fellow skateboarders zipping by on screen. This widely viewed video legitimized a bond between the hip-hop and skateboarding scenes, intertwining Williams’
revisited youthful hobby with his musical personae (Detrick 2007). In an interview conducted by Detrick for the “Skateboarding Rolls Out of the Suburbs,” Williams said, “When I’m with rappers in the studio, they say, ‘I used to skate, too.’ I can only just say I was one of the ones that was willing to speak up about it.”

He founded the ICECREAM skateboard company and team in 2012, whose online mission statement is to “broaden the reach of skate culture to kids of various ethnicities worldwide with a diverse team of skaters and a unique apparel line” (www.teamicecream.com).

Figure 15. ZOO YORK ad featuring Pharrell Williams. Photo by zooyork.com. 1998.

Lupe Fiasco, b. 1982

Born Wasalu Muhammad Jaco in Chicago, poet-turned-rapper Lupe Fiasco came to hip-hop high fame after signing with Atlantic records under the mentorship of megastar Jay-Z and later guest rapping on Kanye West’s song “Touch the Sky” on the album Late Registration. This
collaboration hit the Billboard Hot 100 charts and positioned him to release his first single, “Kick, Push” in 2007, a ballad serenading skateboard culture. The accompanying video is an amalgamation of shaky handheld camera shots set against a gritty urban Chicago backdrop, with close ups of sneakered feet performing skateboard tricks in succession.

This song and video earned Fiasco a new demographic of listeners, the skurban community, that was celebrating new media that reflected and celebrated their subculture. In an interview with the Houston Chronicle, Fiasco said: “[Skateboarding culture is]…just as deep as hip-hop. I’m not the greatest skateboarder, but I’m a damn good rapper, so I made a damn good skateboarding song” (Hardimon 2006). The opening lyrics from the black skateboard psalm “Kick, Push” read:

First got it when he was six didn’t know any tricks
Matter fact first time he got on it he slipped
Landed on his hip and busted his lip
For a week he had to talk with a lisp like this
Now we can end the story right here
But shorty didn’t quit it was something in the air
Yea he said it was something so appealing
He couldn’t fight the feeling something about it
He knew he couldn’t doubt it couldn’t understand it brand it
Since the first kick flip he landed
Labeled a misfit a bandit cucump cucump cucump
His neighbors couldn’t stand it
So he was banished to the park started in the morning
Wouldn’t stop till after dark
Yea when they said its getting late in here
So I’m sorry young man there’s no skating here

Through various modes of mass media and pop culture dissemination, Williams, Wayne, Williams and Fiasco supported the sport, each posing as role models and advocates for young black skateboarders nationwide.
THE ORIGIN STORY: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

According to the participants, their scene did not start because of Reebok’s marketing campaign. Their scene did not start because Pharrell championed for acceptance. According to them, their origin story began in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when a handful of vanguard teens started skateboarding in the sprawling wards of the easternmost part of New Orleans, a swampy suburbia commonly known as ’Da East.

Through interview dissection, narrative construction, and community approval, I was able to create the explanatory text below to situate the birth of the community in New Orleans East due to post-Katrina factors, and the proliferation of the community as a form of resistance against a culture of crime.

While I was living in Chicago the morning the levees broke, my family was here during the storm, and I spent 2006–2010 teaching elementary-aged students photo workshops addressing PTSD while photographing throughout the city. Thus, my findings and analysis are based on interviews and personal experience within, and understanding of, the post-Katrina landscape.

Hurricane Katrina, the 2005 category-five storm exposed a breathtaking negligence and catastrophic failure of the federal levee system and the dysfunction of the federal, state and local response systems (Kahrl 2012:247). The aftermath left an altered landscape and burgeoning societal, political and economic concerns. Those who stayed or returned to the city were forced to cope with pain, struggle, and a very different home. There was only survival through mandatory adaptation or through starting over.
In 2006, local hip-hop artist Fifth Ward Weebie released his hit “Fuck Katrina” which quickly rose to national acclaim, especially resonating with young people, and became an anthem capturing the local sentiment of despair and hopelessness:

I say Fuck Katrina
That Hoe Is A Creeper For Hanging With Rita
They Fuck Over My People
9th Ward Chapter
8th Ward Suffered
7th Ward gone But My Man Said Fuck It
6th Ward Empty
5th Ward Through
Calliope And Iberville Ain’t A Thing We Can Do
West Bank Running
Uptown Ain’t Nothing
New Orleans Eastover Go And Get The Bulldozers

The teenagers of the city, already marginalized and alienated from taking an active role in their society, had to adapt in creative and age-appropriate ways (Freeman and Riordan 2002:298). The newly introduced charter school system took hold after the storm, affecting which schools reopened and when, potentially taking years or not reopening at all (Gabor 2013). Parents, families, and immediate support systems were entangled in the bureaucratic and belabored rebuilding process, and were thus emotionally and often physically unavailable to children. Mental health services were grossly inadequate and violent crime was rampant (D’Antonio 2009:661–662). Blighted, abandoned, and destroyed properties left massive swaths of emptied and overgrown slabs of concrete. General infrastructure was compromised and limited. City policing was spread thin in the chaos, prioritized and allocated to specific neighborhoods like the tourist-filled French Quarter. Parks were closed. Afterschool enrichment programs were nonexistent. The public transportation system, buses and streetcars, took quite
some time to function adequately again. All of these factors highly impacted the city’s youth in a multitude of ways (Golden 2006:37–39).

Figure 16. Blighted apartment complex on Chef Menteur Highway. 2015.

In addition, this impact was compounded in vulnerable areas of the city that were further below sea level than other areas, left submerged underwater for days after the levees broke, succumbing to a more destructive and disastrous toll. The low-lying black suburb of New Orleans East was one of the hardest hit areas of the city. Residents’ concerns were exacerbated in these low-lying areas of inaction, as predominately poor black neighborhoods saw resources flowing elsewhere during rebuilding process (Kahrl 2012:247). According to geographer Richard Campanella, “to add insult to injury, [the East] saw relatively little media and volunteer attention as it struggled to recover, in large part for its lack of a compelling historical narrative and picturesque cityscape” (2013).
Most maps of the city of New Orleans do not include New Orleans East, a signifier of poor public perception, disinvestment, and ultimately abandonment (Campanella 2013). With subdivisions named Plum Orchard, Kenilworth, and Versailles it is the forgotten relic from the era of American suburbanization, now an area of geographic and societal marginalization (Truitt 2012:325). The East was once New Orleans’ promiseland. The sprawling, now-tattered, suburban landscape had symbolized the future of the city, just as the French Quarter symbolizes the city’s past (Souther 2008:198). Developer-sponsored promotional material from 1966 boasts:

New Orleans East offers you the unusual. Approximately 10 miles of industrial frontage on the Gulf-Intra-coastal Canal and deep water frontage planned on the Michoud Canal. Venetian Isles Residential Area –10,000 acres of residential and public area with supporting commercial areas, interlaced by canals on the shores of Lake Ponchartrain and Chef Menteur Pass. New Orleans East is an integral part of the city of New Orleans, one of the most vibrant, individual cities in the United States, with warmth and personality all its own (New Orleans Inc. 1966).

The suburb initially attracted the urban core’s whites until New Orleans blacks rose to political power in the late 1970s, the whites retaliated and moved to adjacent parishes and
upwardly mobile middle-class blacks moved in to the East (Campanella 2013). While it proved to be an “unfulfilled promise as a model for the future, [it] provided a path to a better life for many of the city’s residents, especially African Americans” (Souther 2008:198).

The National Aeronautic and Space Administration (NASA) had a facility in the East and assured residents that there would be new and continuing employment opportunities. But the petroleum bust of the 1980s hit the port city, and especially the East, hard as unemployment soared to 15% and developers halted plans for more subdivisions (Souther 2008:212). Bayou Savage, the largest urban wildlife refuge straddling Highway 90, had been land slated for development, but after the crash developer New Orleans East Inc. sold the 22,000 acres back to the federal government (Campanella 2013).

![Figure 18. Bayou Savauge Wildlife Refuge. 2015.](image)

The promiseland dissolved. Unrented single-family residences were converted into multi-units and landlords welcomed Section 8 vouchers, both tactics geared towards attracting lower-income residents to recover a rental revenue flow (Souther 2008:215). This economic
housing factor was the catalyst for a gradual change in demographics. By 2000, New Orleans East was overwhelmingly working class and 80% black (Souther 2008:216).

In 2006–2008, there was nothing to do in the East. It was as simple as that. New Orleans’ only black suburb, not the urban core that the literature claims, would be the birthplace and playground for a new black youth skate community. Given the city’s disinvestment, the bulk of the establishments in the East that had previously provided the local teenage population with a social space never reopened after Katrina. The mall closed. The one movie theatre closed. The Six Flags Jazzland amusement park closed. Kids were bored, so they started skateboarding.

Figure 19. The remnants of Jazzland. 2015.

They learned tricks by watching videos on YouTube, having an abundance of free time to explore the Internet given schools had not yet reopened. They bought $20 boards at Walmart when their parents took them to household shop. Chuck told me “I asked my parents for a board and they got me my first board, you know, at Walmart. The usual, everyone got their boards there” (2014).
There was a bounty of empty skateable concrete and asphalt parking lots attached to blighted strip malls. But it was not solely boredom that sparked the community birth—it was the need to create an accepting family of peers that served as a support system rooted in trust and reciprocity during the rebuilding process (Weller 2006:566). “We’re like a brotherhood. We help each other. Skateboarding is like a family,” Chuck continued. It was a need to individually participate in a non-team and non-competitive activity that offered personal growth and accomplishment through practice and perseverance.

![Figure 20. Kacey Holmes, 18. 2015.](image)

Kacey:
I look up to guys who don’t worry about how other people do it, they do it their own way. And when they land a trick you can see the progression, how long it took them to land that trick. That shit’s worth more than money, when you land that shit, and you’ve been practicing for hours and hours and you finally land it, nobody can’t pay me for that. I did that shit! I’m good now. It’s changed my life, I wouldn’t change it.
Lance:
You get momentum from people. Say he jumped down this, it’s gonna make me want to do it. Makes us both better. I’ll skate as long as I can. It feels good when you land a trick, when you been trying it all day and you finally land it and roll away. It’s like a big old relief. It’s like dang, I did it. It’s like when you win a Bingo game.

Dante:
There’s always something new to learn, I like to learn tricks with people. Always learning something new.

Julian:
It’s fun, just to feel that progression. After trying it [a trick] for so long and then you finally stick it. It motivates me. If I weren’t skating I’d probably just be staying at home playing video games all day, eating potato chips on the couch.

Jamal, 19, told me “skateboarding is the most positive thing in my life. It gives me the motivation to get better and better.” His cousin Brandon, 14, chimed in “and Jamal helps me get
better, he’s really good motivation.” This is a sentiment I hear again, and again. “Positivity,” “progression” and “motivation” were reoccurring key words.

Unfortunately, when skateboarders reach a point where their progression is halted because there is no place for them to skate, they quit. According to Lance, “they [good skateboarders] get bored fast down here, they get bored and they quit, because there’s no place for them to skate.”

The most important aspect of my research, not included in previous skateboarding literature, is the active choice of youth to create an alternative to the landmark culture of petty and violent crime that consumes and seduces far too many young, poor, black men in this city, as reiterated by Wellford, Bond, and Goodison in their 2011 collaborative crime report. In nearly every single interview I administered, each skateboarder noted how the community gave them an alternative to participating in crime.

Figure 22. Jamal and Brandon. 2015.

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Frederick:
My probation officer told me I should start skating, he told me it was popular with the kids and I should try it. All my homies in the hood were getting into it too. At first I thought it was pussy, you know, like some white shit, but I tried it out and I liked it. All the people in my family were like, what the fuck? You doing that shit now? They are hood though you know, they never seen black kids skating. I come to the park [Parisite] everyday, getting my skills, hanging with other skaters. It’s a big part of my life, I’m here at the park everyday. I go to school at Delgado [community college] and I skate, I’m just really trying to hold myself up and do something with myself.

CJ:
I use to sling weed, I ain’t gonna lie. I use to sell a lot of weed, but I ain’t in the streets anymore. I skateboard, I got a job at Morning Call [restaurant] cooking beignets at night making $10 bucks an hour. I’m happy. I skate everyday. I can’t hang out with my old crew anymore, I don’t want to be on the streets. So I make friends skating, new friends, and I don’t do dumb shit anymore.

Trey:
I was kinda hanging with the wrong crowd, but skating took me away from that. I focused more on that [skateboarding].
Kacey:
If I wasn’t skating, I would definitely not be doing anything good, I can tell you that. This shit taught me how to never give up, it changed my life, I wouldn’t trade this shit for anything. I like to pass my tricks on to younger kids, like people helped me. I’d tell homies, yo try it this way, just like other kids had helped me learn.

Jamize:
I hang out with a bunch of different people, I tried to get away from my neighborhood uptown in Calliope. It’s a bunch of stuff that happens now and then, all types of shit. Shooting, fights, a lot of danger. I stay away from it. Skating helps me stay away from it a lot. It makes me explore most of the city, it helps me get around a bunch.

Todd:
Skateboarding always related to urban culture, but it’s crazy back in the day how few people skateboarded in the city, and now you see multiple skaters daily. I Wikipedia-ed the crack epidemic one day, one of the theories as to why the crack epidemic slowed down was that these younger kids were looking at how shitty their lives were, their parents and older siblings that were a part of the crack epidemic. I think these kids [local skateboarders] are looking at all the bullshit their parents and older siblings were doing when they were growing up in New Orleans in the late 1990s, and these kids don’t want to be in that hood [slang for “ghetto”] lifestyle.

Chuck:
The City doesn’t reward us for what we do, sometimes it’s bad because we skate on [private] property, but we aren’t going to sue anybody. Skateboarding keeps me out of trouble, because young black kids these days, and white kids too, you know they get into robbery and burglary and weapons. Me and my team, we never got into any of that. We don’t look down that way. Kids here reflect off of what other people do.

As Chuck told me, skateboarding continues to be marginalized and misunderstood in New Orleans and skateboarders grow. This constant struggle between the skate community and the state strains those who participate in it. “You get angry,” skateboarding legend Stacy Peralta attests, “because you know that ultimately you’re not hurting anybody” (Mortimer 2008:87). And in New Orleans, these skateboarders are actively engaging in a positive activity where they do not hurt anybody and they do not engage in violence, they are creating a subculture in rebellion against the plaguing “social disease of street crime culture,” (The Lifers Public Safety Steering Committee of the State Correctional Institution at Graterford, Pennsylvania 2004:48).
In *Stalefish*, influential professional skateboarder Daewon Song says he loves chatting with people outside of the culture about skateboarding. “They get pretty excited, because they knew nothing about it. They can see skaters and know what they’re up to, instead of thinkin’ they’re just troublemakers. Skateboarding used to be thought of as a step above gangbanging, at one point. A parent did not want you to skateboard. I want people to understand skateboarding” (208:110).

![Figure 24. Justin at Parisite. 2014.](image)

According to Kurt Weigle, president of the Downtown Development District, there is a “great lack of clarity” in city law governing skateboarding and skateboarders (Reckdahl 2015). Justin Gordon, who started skating in the East in 2006, is confronted by security and police officers nearly ten times on any given skate day. The freshly erected Crescent City Park lining the Mississippi River through the Bywater neighborhood has strict “no skateboarding” rules posted and enforced. Reelected District “B” councilwoman La Toya Cantrell, according to Fein, has been aligning with business owners in the Central Business District to outlaw skateboarding within its perimeter. Ramps and other skate equipment donated to the city of New Orleans by
the corporation Red Bull earmarked for a skate park continue to sit in storage, disassembled under an inaccessible overpass (Shirtcliff 2012:11).

The lawmakers and city planners of New Orleans still for the most part fail to understand skateboarding and continue to demonize the activity through active policing, youth curfew laws, refusing to sanction spaces for skating, and an influx of metal knobs embedded on skateable concrete pieces of the urban environment meant to deter skateboard use (Carr 2012). According to Trey, “they [the city] started to put caps on ledges and stuff, they started capping everything [skateable].” In a city whose name is as synonymous with “Mardi Gras” as much as it is with “murder epidemic,” I believe the city is in a unique and exciting position to create a potential sea change in its crime culture by accepting, accommodating and encouraging this new community (Galofaro 2014).
New Orleans needs safe sanctioned spaces for skateboarders to gather, expand their support system, develop self identity, progress and confront the marginalization in planning that excludes children and teenagers. Mayor Landrieu’s anti-murder campaign includes infrastructurally encouraging teenage boys to “play Saturday night basketball instead of killing or getting killed,” why isn’t that same concept applied to the skateboarders of the city (Galofaro 2014)? The “sports vs. gangs” logic is not only applicable to basketball, and luckily some rebellious elder skateboarders understand that distinction and have given the city a viable model for infrastructural skateboarding support (Atencio and Wright 2008:277).
CASE STUDY: PARISITE SKATE PARK

On February 28, 2015, Parisite skate park held an official grand opening celebration with mayor Mitch Landrieu in attendance, a gesture of city acceptance and appreciation that the founders of the skate park could never have anticipated. The founders, a consortium of adult skateboarders, had grown tired of begging city officials to provide a sanctioned safe space for the local skateboard community, so they decided to create their own—illegally. In 2010, underneath the Interstate 610 overpass where Paris Avenue and Pleasure Street meet in the Gentilly neighborhood, three rogue skateboarders began pouring concrete on Norfolk Southern Railroad Company-owned land.

Figure 27. (l-r) Joey O’Mahoney and Ally Bruser. 2014.

Joey O’Mahoney, Ally Bruser and Mark Steuer, along with a newly dedicated volunteer workforce comprised of fellow skaters of all ages, spent the next two years erecting ramps and creating a Do It Yourself (D.I.Y.) space where the growing population of skaters could practice
and build social capital and community. It went by the colloquial names Hippie Slab and Peach Orchard. There were potlucks and punk shows and contests. When train conductors slowly crossed the tracks lining the park, skaters would practice their hardest tricks, screaming “tricks for trains!” The train whistle would blow in appreciation (Allen 2014). Skylar Fein referred to it in an interview as “the closest thing to Utopia.” In a piece for Transgressor Magazine for which I collaborated with Clark Allen, he writes:

The most transcendent idea behind Parisite is the idea of open inclusion and community involvement. Skating and working together foster that notion, especially in an impoverished community with a crime rate of landmark proportion (Allen 2014).

![Image of The Peach Orchard](Image)

Figure 28. The Peach Orchard. Photo courtesy of Clark Allen. 2011.

Shirtcliff refers to such skate spaces as liminal areas that support the creation and organization of local knowledge. He goes on to write:

Liminal places and skate parks on the “edge” of urban centrality simultaneously marginalize adolescent activity and provide them with access to free space that helps them to build local knowledge. Such places continue to reflect the transgressive behavior of youth, perpetuating the culture of mistrust, and encourage prosocial behaviors and promote individual development. The Peach Orchard [dissertation written in 2012 pre-
Parisite] reflects both transgressive behavior (trespassing and vandalizing public property) and peer support (the concrete rams represent group effort) (2012:147).

After 25 months in existence, Norfolk Southern bulldozed the skate park in the middle of the night. It devastated those had built the park and the community around it. With redirected efforts fueled by determination, O’Mahoney, Bruser, Steuer, and Fein formed the non-profit Transitional Spaces, moving from a D.I.Y mantra to a more legitimate course of action. They began building—again, illegally—the second incarnation of the park, dubbed Parisite for Paris Avenue that bound the space, and they rebuilt just yards away from the original location, this time on city-owned land where they felt they had more power to negotiate.

Figure 29. The Peach Orchard after bulldozing. Photo Courtesy of Clark Allen. 2012.

They attended city council hearings, scheduled meetings with their representatives, wrote grants, eventually gained a partnership with Tulane School of Architecture’s Urban Research and Outreach Program, and made a couple allies at City Hall (Webster 2014). The city was littered with flyers that read: “What’s the largest U.S. city without a skate park? New Orleans. But that’s changing! And it’s thanks to a bunch of skaters who refused to give up.”
FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The official press release from the mayor’s office, City Celebrates New Orleans’ First Public Skate park, quotes Jackson Blalock of Transitional Spaces:

“The City of New Orleans recognized the local skateboarding community’s drive to create new forms of recreation space, and responded by joining forces. Together, we have created one of the most diverse and accepting skate parks in the country. Transitional Spaces looks forward to connecting park participants to City processes through further development of Parisite Skate park and other planned skateboarding amenities.”

My goal as a researcher and an elder skateboarder, is to take this work and strengthen the skateboarders “own identity through a coloration on a collective project of self representation and inform the public of their existence and (indirectly) their legitimate struggle” (Prins 2002:65). This community needs more city-sanctioned spaces to skateboard as skateboarders make active choices to create positive choices based on social and psychological capital gain and
in rebellion against the city’s crime. Ideally these images add strength to the struggle for visibility and accommodation of this new community.

Figure 31. Tulane City Center with park founders and skaters. Photo by architecture.tulane.edu/event/2015/1305. 2014.

I have been an educator and active youth advocate for the past 18 years. I have predominately taught visual storytelling where young people create and share their photographic personal narratives with a wider audience. My underlying goal echoes the development model of Rethink, a local youth organizing and leadership development organization. My work is geared to empower young people through understanding individual struggles in a greater social context, discussing viable solutions to address those struggles, and developing strategies to ultimately transform. I will continue to work within this community, helping to create a participatory core group of youth skateboard advocates that will partner with me to create attainable strategies to influence the city to build more skate parks in New Orleans.
With my 20-year old ties to the sport and childhood skate friends who are now working within the industry, I have already secured three major partners and donors to help build more skate parks in the city. They, too, used to run from the police and beg their local representatives to listen to their youthful wishes for a sanctioned space to skate. Now they are in the monetary position to help lessen the marginalization of young, black skateboarders in New Orleans.

As of Spring 2015, skateboard advocates continue to pressure the city to develop skate parks in other neighborhoods of need, heavily advocating for the development of New Orleans Recreation Development Commission (NORDC) purported short-listed potential projects located in Behrman Park, Lafitte Greenway, and Joe Brown Park in New Orleans East…where it all started (NORDC 2011).
PHOTO GALLERY

Figure 33. Anthony doing a backside disaster at Parisite. 2015.
Figure 34. Skateboard tattoos. 2015.
Figure 35. Brad doing an Ollie in New Orleans East. 2015.
Figure 36. Jamize doing a frontside 180 at Parisite. 2015.
Figure 37. Graffiti on Read Blvd. “Dosage” is a skateboard clothing company in the East. 2015.
Figure 38. Lance doing a kickflip in the East. 2015.
Figure 39. Skateboard wounds and scars. 2015.
Figure 40. Devin, 18, at Parisite. 2015.
Figure 41. Trey doing a blunt to fakie at Pariste. 2015.
Figure 42. Skateboards from New Orleans-based companies Humidity, Preservation and Sativa. 2015.
Figure 43. Tattoo of Thrasher skateboarding magazine logo. 2015.
Figure 44. Park users at Parisite. 2014.
Figure 45. Dante, 19, at Parisite. 2015.
Figure 46. Dajuan, 17, at Parisite. 2014.
Figure 47. Jamize, 17, at Parishite. 2014.
Figure 48. Patrick “Melon”, 24, on the Mississippi River Banks. 2013.
Figure 49. Skateboard stickers on Brad’s television. 2015.
Figure 50. Trey at Parisite. 2014.
Figure 51. CJ at Parisite. 2013.
Figure 52. Bottom of a DGK board. 2015.
Figure 53. Blighted apartment complex on Chef Menteur. 2015.
Figure 54. Lance at Parisite. 2013.
Figure 55. The Read Blvd. library in New Orleans East. The main skate spot where skaters gather after hours to skate the 10 stairs. 2015.
Figure 56. The Read Blvd. Hospital District in New Orleans East. A popular skate spot where skaters gather after hours to skate the curbs and ledges. 2015.
Figure 57. Skate spot Joe Brown Park in New Orleans East. 2015.
Figure 58. Chuck at Parisite. 2014.
Figure 59. Justin, 20, doing a kickflip on the lake levee. 2015.
Figure 60. Justin’s skateboard personalization after quitting the sport for 2 years. 2015.
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Interviews:

All interviews were administered between 2012 and 2015.

Online:


Print:


APPENDIX A: ORAL HISTORY EXCERPTS

Anthony:

I was living in Gonzalez [Louisiana], I was in Gonzalez after the hurricane, then we moved back. I was walking home from school and they were building a skate park. I was one of the only black skaters out there, I used to go the skate park everyday. They have some black kids out there now, they just started, I was just out there last weekend. I skate with Lance [Anthony is Lance’s cousin], and sometimes Adam from Preservation [skateboard company] but mostly I’m by myself. When I don’t skate it’s boring, so I just skate everyday. If I wasn’t skating I’d just be sitting inside, playing video games or something.

My family is supportive, they buy me boards and stuff. I show younger kids stuff. When I seen them building a skate park [in Gonzalez] it wasn’t finished yet, but I seen them building ramps and I really wanted to try it. At first I had a Walmart board, then Adam from Preservation came down there. I had to do a trick and he gave me a preservation board and it was better than the Walmart board, and I was like I need a new board. I’m into this pro Ishod [Wair] he’s black, he’s one of the best, he’s got sway. And Lance, he’s my role model too. I think they [the city] puts us out because they don’t want us to hurt ourselves. But I don’t know why they don’t build a park, I know they could afford one. We skate at the library [in the east] a lot, we come on Fridays and Sundays a lot. They have a church around the corner from his [lance’s] house and that’s it. Just two spots. When my mama and my brother go to work they drop me off at Parisite, then I walk to Grandmas’.

Brad:

After Hurricane Katrina passed, I started getting into skateboarding. I wanted to make it like a real sport. Skateboarding has gotten bigger and bigger now, but as I was coming up it wasn’t as common for a black person to be skating. It was more for a white person, for white people. Coming up skating people always used to say, “oh skateboarding is for white people.” “Oh you wanna be a white boy,” they’d say to me. I was 11 when I started, I got my board straight outta Walmart. Skated on it for a couple weeks then it broke. Bought another board at Walmart, then me and my cousins broke it. I bought my first real board at a skate shop in Baton Rouge, it had black wheels, it taught me how to Ollie [a common trick for starters].
When I moved to New Orleans after the storm [from Baton Rouge], I didn’t think they had a skate scene here, especially a black scene. But I found this guy named Imani, and we started skating around the East, making our own spots. It was 2010, and you had to really look for black kids. They weren’t skating downtown yet, they would just go down for Go Skate Day. They were skating around the East but you really had to look for them, The East is so big. In 2011, a lot of the skaters started to leave the East and head downtown, showing other black kids that you could skate and get good at it. Kids in the East had nothing to do, they were trying to stay out of trouble so they picked up a skateboard and started skating.

*Lance:*

I went to Jacksonville, Florida for Katrina, I was six. We came back about a year later. I started skating when I was 12. I was in the East, I’ve been there my whole life. My older cousin started skating, he was just skating by himself out here in the East. We shared a board until I started learning my own tricks. I was on YouTube, learning tricks. My cousin doesn’t skate anymore, so I was just skating by myself out here. I started going downtown, to Humidity [skate shop] and I started hooking up with bookoo [slang for a lot] people downtown.

We skated everyday. I skated at Poydras, One Shell, the Convention Center and Armstrong Park. The park is the only place you can really skate without getting kicked out. At One Shell you have at least 10 minutes [to skate] before they [security] come out. They knobbled [metal deterrents on benches] Poydras, so you really can’t skate that anymore. There was one lady security guard, I asked her if I could land my trick before I she kicked us out. She said yeah, she said she wanted to see us be something. They had a skate park, Waynes’ [Lil’ Wayne], but it’s not open anymore. We got through the window a couple times to skate after it closed down. I like to skate street, mostly rails and stairs. You ain’t gotta worry about nothing. We look at the world differently. A normal person would just be like, oh those are stairs. We see if we can skate it. You get momentum from people. Say he jumped down this, it’s gonna make me want to do it. Makes us both better.
Trey:

I’ve been chilling, slowing it down, trying to get it together. I’m about to graduate. I’m looking for a job, my pocket’s been hurting. I didn’t quit [skating] I just paused it. People think I quite because I got too good at it, and there wasn’t anything left for me to skate, but I’m not that good. I’m never satisfied though, I always push myself to go further. I was in Germany, my dads in the military so we were travelling a lot, my brother was skating then, he exposed me to it, I was very little and he was older. There was a skate park down the street there, so that’s when it all started. I don’t remember the year, but I came back in 6th grade, 6 years ago I guess in 2009. We moved to Gentilly [a neighborhood]. I started going downtown a lot, there were a lot of skaters down there. Humidity [skateboard shop] was out there, the skate scene was really poppin’ off out there, down on Canal Street.

That’s how I really, really got into it. [When I was moving around in the military] the skate scene was always mostly white. It was kinda surprisingly to see black kids skating here, I didn’t expect the skate scene to be that big out here. I was skating with friends, it was more of a social thing really. That was what my life was a bout, really. I didn’t take it seriously, it was more about having fun, meeting friends, skatin’. Skating from spot to spot, that was what my life was all about really. I come to Parisite a lot, I skate the street area here. [because of Parisite] a lot more people are starting to come, it’s starting to get a lot more exposure, more people are starting to skate. It’s public, you don’t have to pay. That’s huge. I was kinda hanging with the wrong crowd, but skating took me away from that. I focused more on that.

Dante:

I saw skating online, street guys like Rodney Mullen [white street skater active in the 80s and 90s] so I started skating and my brother started skating with me. Just me and my brother skated, no kids in my neighborhood were skating. There’s always something new to learn, I like to learn tricks with people. Always learning something new. It keeps people out of trouble, from diving back into it [trouble].

Jamize:

I’ve been skating for 5 years. I started by watching cartoons, like rocket power, a bunch of other things. It excited me. I got my first board at Walmart, it had a little blue design on it, and my brother had a red one on it. I was in Richmond Virginia then, after Katrina, we came back at the beginning of 2007. I moved into the Iberville with my
grandma. I really started skating a lot in 2007 downtown, the crew wasn’t as big as it got, it got big in 2011, in 2007 it was just a bunch of local kids, about 12.

One of my homies, named Keelan, had been skating for a while [downtown]. We were skating in a basketball court in the Iberville, we started skating right there. Then we started skating on Canal [street] in front of Sports Plus and all that. I learned tricks by watching videos, and I stole this book from Kipp [charter school] it was about skateboarding. So I stole it and it taught you how to do simple tricks like ollies and kickflips, so I just put it in my backpack. I looked at it when I got home and started learning from there. By me moving around, I had friends with access to internet, so I started watching YouTube a lot.

After the Iberville I went to the 12th ward off Louisiana [Ave.] I got people skating up there, there wasn’t anyone skating, maybe 3 people up there. There was this kid PJ, and a couple other kids. We would skate uptown in front of Walgreens and Walter L. Cohen. Yeah, right there. It’s fun. It’s interesting, it’s non stop action for me. I hang out with a bunch of different people, I tried to get away from my neighborhood uptown in Calliope. It’s a bunch of stuff that happens now and then, all types of shit. Shooting, fights, a lot of danger. I stay away from it. Skating helps me stay away from it a lot. It makes me explore most of the city, it helps me get around a bunch.

Patrick “Melon”:

I started skateboarding when I was 16, I started skateboarding pretty much because I wasn’t good at any other sports. I was in that era where I was called white boy, I was called fag, I was called a bunch of other demeaning things because I skateboarded. I’m not great at it [skateboarding], but its something I can do. I can ride down the street on a skateboard and it’s one of the most alleviating feelings I can have.

The [black] kids who started skating here are inner-city kids, they are used to that whole thug mentality, like skateboarding wasn’t cool even a couple years ago. Skateboarding is a beautiful thing, anybody who wants to be involved in skateboarding is more than welcome in it. But I don’t like the people that profit off of it, for the cool factor. Like how you’ll see skateboarders in music videos or people talking about skateboarding in their songs. The main factor of it is, they could be out here doing all these violent things, shooting people, doing dumb things, but they’re out here skateboarding. This here puts a cap on it [violence] to an extent, it doesn’t happen as much as it should. When you’re bored you’re going to be irritable but when you have an outlet like skateboarding, it’s an easier way to make sure people don’t get killed, don’t get shot, don’t get beat up.
Skateboarding through the French quarter, that’s it. It’s probably the most fun you can have in New Orleans. There aren’t a lot of clear cut skate spots in New Orleans, you have to be creative about where you skate. Though now that it’s boomed the security has gotten stricter in a lot of areas. At this point we have to figure out where we’re going to skate, because where we have been skating we’re gonna get kicked out in two minutes. New Orleans has potholes and big cracks in the street everywhere, you have to find a place that’s skateable. and that sets a challenge, you have to actively find places to skate.

Chuck:

I started skating in 2008, I started skating with my neighbors, just pushing around. This one kid Nathan on the block started pushing around with us, doing tricks. He made me jealous, I wanted to get good, so it was on. I’d seen a commercial on TV, there was a skater in the commercial. I asked my parents for a board and they got me my first board, you know, at Walmart. The usual, everyone got their boards there. [Called] A Little Mongoose, two in a pack, I loved it.

As I grew up, I started exploring the city more and meet people. By seeing other kids doing it [skating], I kept skating and kept getting better. There are some posers, they started skating because of Lil’ Wayne or some shit, I be hating on them. They’re not real. We formed our team, the C.R.E.A.M team. It started out small, just four people, we got about 10 now we’re the best little street team down town. We’re like a brotherhood. We help each other. Skateboarding is like a family.

The City doesn’t reward us for what we do, sometimes it’s bad because we skate on [private] property, but we aren’t going to sue anybody. Skateboarding keeps me out of trouble, because young black kids these days, and white kids too, you know they get into robbery and burglary and weapons. Me and my team, we never got into any of that. We don’t look down that way. Kids here reflect off of what other people do.
Vita

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